

**Service 20th March 2011, 10.00am, Sunday of Reminiscere**

**Topic: Where Signs Are No Longer Sufficient**

**Matthew 12, 38 - 42**

**Dear Church,**

Yesterday, I sat with four young people, planning our next "Brunch for Kids". As an opening to our subject with a biblical background we spoke about signs. I thus asked: "What do you mean by 'signs'? What defines a sign? What is it a sign?" The answers were quite different. For example, it was said: "If a glass tips over and it remains intact, it is a sign." Well, that seems to me to be more of a superstition. But there were other interesting answers: a light signal from a lighthouse to guide ships. Or: street signs or traffic signs that also give guidance or express a warning. Also, colors are used as signs, for example red for a hazard. Or: The skull symbol as a warning for a toxic substance, e.g. a chemical, or the symbol for radioactivity, which is very newsworthy nowadays. We thus realized that signs can have different functions, such as

- a) helping orientation
- b) warning of dangers
- c) indicating certain matters or circumstances
- d) signs as means of communication (stenography)
- e) signs in sign language:

I was in contact with deaf-mutes in Burundi, Africa. Two characters I have learned and remembered: [demonstrates signs with hands]

akayabagu keza - which stands for "Enjoy your meal!"

Imana iratubona twese - which means "God sees us all!"

"Where signs are no longer sufficient" is our topic for today. What is that supposed to mean? Does that not sound contradictory? Are signs not supposed to help recognize things, to understand things, to be able to comprehend things better?

Our first guiding idea is:

**1. Where signs are no longer sufficient - meaning "we lack the expressions" - we cannot explain, neither with words nor with characters.**

What does this have to do with our sermon text? - Well, Jesus Christ is in conflict with the scribes and Pharisees. This is how our section starts and I would like to read verse 38 again:

*"Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." (Matth. 12,38)*

What a pious hope! What a supposedly important request:

*"Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." (Matth. 12,38)*

The most pious and zealous theologians from around 2,000 years wished to see a sign of Jesus Christ, a sign to help them comprehend this Jesus of Nazareth. A sign to confirm this Jesus of Nazareth, to identify him as the one which he claims to be and to identify him as the one for which many people already consider him. The most pious in the country wish to see a sign. The best theologians need a sign to believe in Jesus Christ. To recognize his words,

his words which are so important, and his teachings. A sign to gain clarity whether or not he could be the Messiah. Whether or not he *may* be the Messiah.

Actually, this is an understandable request. In fact, it is a legitimate wish. It is nothing but righteous, is it not?

Indeed it is so, yes, but the context makes clear what is behind it. Here in this chapter 12, there are already two previously reported miracles that Jesus Christ had done. One miracle was even worked in the synagogue, where the scribes and Pharisees had their regular place. Here, he had healed the crippled hand of a man in front of their eyes during Sabbath. And the Pharisees had nothing better to do than to discuss how they might murder Jesus. Then another miracle: Jesus healed a man possessed. I read the verses 22 - 24:

*"Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?" But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons that this fellow drives out demons."*

(Matth. 12,22-24)

What a mistake! And what a madness to demand a third sign or rather a third miracle! For the Pharisees and scribes Jesus could not be the Christ. He could not claim the position of the Messiah for himself. To their minds, this could not be and must not be. They were blinded by their own view of things, by their own religious pride. There was not even the intention to deal with Jesus Christ openly and honestly. Therefore, these harsh words of Jesus:

*"A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."* (Matth. 12,39-40)

Here, Jesus alluded to his death and resurrection. And for the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus' resurrection was just as impossible as the fact that Jesus was the Messiah.

It was already clear that Jesus had to be the promised Messiah. It was evident that Jesus had to be at least a special prophet. But many thought he was the Elijah of modern times, the second Elijah, the Expected One. It was already certain that Jesus had to be at least special, someone with regards to miracles. Up to this moment, he had already done many miracles in public. One truly finds themselves at a loss for words at this. One simply runs out of explanations. Signs are not necessary any longer. Anyone who has seen what Jesus Christ has done cannot do but "believe". Where signs are no longer sufficient – where we can no longer find the words and expressions, God is involved, God has a hand in it.

Yet, the Pharisees and scribes still would not believe. And the question is: What do we do? What do you want to do in the face of everything you've heard about God and Jesus Christ? The Bible is one of the most testified books of antiquity. Time and time again, archeology makes more spectacular discoveries that confirm the Bible. And still, in spite of all this, believing is still hard to do. We are invitees to faith - that is the message of this story. Do not be fooled by your own imagination. Just try to get involved with Jesus for once. Just pray this prayer, which was prayed by a man standing before Jesus: "Lord, I believe, help my disbelief." And you will see that joy and peace will come.

A further thought:

## **2. Where signs are no longer sufficient, God's word has to do it**

God's word had come to effect at Nineveh. Jonah preached there and the people repented in dust and ashes. And they returned from their evil ways and begged for God's grace. They were rescued. They believed the words the prophet Jonah said to them. That was their strength! That decorated them! Jesus said:

*"The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here." (Matth. 12,41)*

And then it was the Queen of the South, who came to King Solomon, to hear Solomon's wisdom. Again, it is about the word! Jesus said,

*"The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the Wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here." (Matth. 12,42)*

"She believed in those words" Jesus wanted to say - the words of King Solomon, in which God showed himself to the Queen of the South.

And once again: Is it not a miracle? In Jewish law it is said like this: In Judaism a statement has to be based on the word of two or three witnesses to be heard in court or to make it believable. Talking to these so-called religious Jews, the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus used the word of two pagans or pagan groups: the people of Nineveh and the Queen of the South, which will be far ahead to the scribes and Pharisees on Judgement Day. Jesus takes these pagans as an example for the pious Jews.

*"And indeed a greater than Jonah is here." (Matth. 12,41)*

*"And indeed a greater than Solomon is here." (Matth. 12,42)*

*"Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple." (Matth. 12,6)*

What is going on here: this is Jesus. Jesus Christ is here, the Son of God is here. Here is the Savior, Christ the Lord. This is what the angel said to the shepherds of Bethlehem:

*"For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."*  
*(Luke 2,11)*

This is the maker of peace. Here is the Crucified. Here is the Savior from guilt and sin. Here is the risen Christ. Here is the master of the world. Here is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Here is Jesus.

Where signs are no longer sufficient – as they fail to suitably describe him. He invites us. We can believe in Him. We can pray to Him - and He will hear us! I have found the ground that holds my anchor forever, elsewhere than in Jesus' wounds, as it was before the time of the world, the ground which stands unmovable, when earth and heaven will cease to exist.

Let me say a few words about the signs of the times these days, concerning Japan. The media want to tell us that we are confronted with apocalyptic signs. These pictures of the

destruction by the earthquake, the tsunami and the devastating effect of the released radioactivity are terrible. I want to read a few verses from Matthew 24, in which Jesus Christ precisely addresses these things:

*"Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows." (Math 24,3-8)*

The signs of the times warn us to be vigilant and call us to faith. Later, Jesus said in this context:

*"Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." (Matth. 24,44)*

The signs of the times will show. Let us pray for the people in Japan. We will do so later in the intercession. You can do it at home, too. I am deeply convinced that the reason for the meltdown not having started yet, are the prayers of the faithful and God has the power over nuclear energy, too.

Where signs are no longer sufficient, there must be God, and there must be Jesus.  
Where signs are no longer sufficient, the Lord's word must do.  
Let us recognize the signs of times and turn to Him - our Savior and Redeemer Jesus Christ.  
His words and his spirit shall wake and kindle in us the faith that leads to eternal life.

Amen.