

Sermon HIW February 17, 2008 Petri Church

Text: Matthew 12, 38 – 41

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Prophets of salvation, i. e. people who promise a better future, were sought after 2000 years ago. For most Israelites the time of the Roman occupation was a time of doom. Not much wonder that people kept running after all those who appointed themselves as prophets and who proclaimed redemption and salvation in the near future.

In our time people in general don't react all that much differently, especially when they are startled by shocking news, e. g. when we hear about the terror and violence in our world or about dangerous illnesses or impending epidemics like bird flu which has not been defeated yet. And we are all stirred up by the report of the IPCC on climate change and the consequences we will face if we don't reduce our CO₂ emission quickly and drastically.

But also in our personal lives, in our families or at work, we are sometimes hit by strokes of fate or other trials and tribulations.

Not much wonder that we prick up our ears when somebody comes and promises the solution to our problems. Scientists and doctors proclaim that with the help of genetic engineering they will be soon able to heal incurable illnesses or slow down the process of aging. Politicians and experts in economic affairs assure a lasting reduction of unemployment and solutions to other global problems. And for our own wellbeing there are lots of adverts for wellness packages for mind and body in these times of stress and rush. No doubt prophets of salvation are sought after today as well, and we must admit that some of them do fulfil what they promise. Undoubtedly many medical and technical progresses have turned out to be a blessing for mankind and methods of relaxation can help to wind you down and give you new energy. But at the same time there are lots of untrustworthy people, self-appointed prophets of salvation, who count on people's fears and try to rip you off or entice you into all kinds of sects or dubious groups like the scientologists.

And all of a sudden, in the midst of all the voices of this puzzling choir of prophets of salvation, there is one who comes and says: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." There is one who comes and says: "I will provide salvation for you. If the world follows me, it will be cured. If you all believe me and follow me, your lives will be healed and find fulfilment."

People reacted suspiciously. Why believe him of all prophets? How can we become certain whether it's true what he is saying? In Matthew we read: "Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him: 'Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you'".

Of course they wanted to see such a sign. The expected Messiah would perform miracle after miracle, so they were told. If Jesus was the promised Messiah he would perform them. We already heard Jesus' answer. It sounds harsh and rude: "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it." Why this? Doesn't Jesus contradict himself? He had given signs, hadn't he? Hadn't he turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana? Hadn't he cured the sick and blind? Hadn't he forgiven sins even of the tax collector and interpreted the laws of the Sabbath totally differently? Hadn't he acted in the full authority of the Son of Man? Were all these not unambiguous signs that he, indeed, was the Son of God? Yes, of course, for those who believe; but for those, who don't believe or have doubts?

Let's think about it for a moment. How is it with the unambiguity of signs? How is it e. g. with a bunch of flowers? A bunch of flowers can be a sign, too, can't it? A bunch of flowers could be a sign of love for someone who is in love. But if you are not in love? Well, a bunch of flowers could then be a sign of politeness, maybe also of joy, but maybe also of currying favour with somebody. Well, as we can see, a bunch of flowers like any other sign is not really unambiguous after all, but rather ambiguous. This was the case with Jesus' signs as well. They were not totally unambiguous. There were so many other witchdoctors and magicians around.

At this point I would like to ask you: Is there a certain sign by which you could become totally convinced of the presence of God in our time? Would it be if someone survived an accident or returned safely from a war front ?

I know quite a lot of people who feel like that. And I think they are right in being thankful to God for his protection. When my own sister survived a severe brain haemorrhage last year, we couldn't but praise God for his mercy. But was it really God or rather sheer good luck? How come that others don't survive, that my neighbour or in war my comrade was not saved? Unambiguous signs? Let's think about it a little further. Even if we did get an unambiguous sign, would it really totally extinguish all our doubts?

There is a woman. She suspects her husband of having become unfaithful. She takes a lot of action to gain certainty. She questions him, she checks his mail, his suits, his bags. Finally she employs a private detective. The result is that there is absolutely no reason for being suspicious. The faithfulness of her husband has been proved totally. Yet the woman cannot find peace of mind. The chain of many proofs has not created new trust. There is no redeeming relief in spite of unambiguous signs.

That's why Jesus said to the Pharisees "I won't give you a sign." It would not create a reliable and lasting trust in me. Who knows, maybe you would turn away again if you saw

another, maybe even bigger sign next day. Therefore, no signs. You can't demand a proof for something that unfolds itself through trust alone.

What does this answer of Jesus mean to us? Will there be no certainty for our faith, no certain answers to our questions?

Well, I wish Jesus' refusal could first of all have a liberating effect on us. We need not always keep looking for definite proofs or guarantees, because we would only end up going round in circles. It wouldn't help us to move on. On the contrary, it would lead us into the wrong direction. We might even be so caught up by the fascination of a miracle that we might forget the one who caused the miracle.

Our text has, however, at this point a big surprise in store for us. In spite of his refusal, Jesus offers a sign after all, but it is a strange and rather cryptic sign. He says: "You won't be given a sign except the sign of the prophet Jonah". You may remember Jonah. He refused to proclaim doom to the people of Niniveh and fled over the sea. There he was thrown into the water and was swallowed by a great fish which after three days vomited him onto dry land. From there it wasn't far to Niniveh. Jonah realises that he can't get away from God's command. Therefore he finally preaches repentance to the city and indeed, people did change and were saved after all.

When Jesus talks about the sign of Jonah he refers to the time that Jonah spent in the belly of the fish. He says: "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". And so it happened, not exactly, though, because it was only two nights that Jesus was buried – I wonder why Jesus said three nights? Wasn't he able to calculate correctly or couldn't he foresee as clearly? Well, I'm afraid, we won't solve this question to our complete satisfaction. More important, however, is the fact that Jesus, after his crucifixion, descended to the dead, went down to hell as we used to say in the Apostles' Creed, and thus was completely surrounded by darkness like Jonah in the belly of the fish. Through this Jesus gives an unambiguous sign, and I am very aware of what I am saying: He gives an unambiguous sign, namely as follows: Even the realm of hell can be reached by the love of God.

If I try to translate this old mystic picture into our time, I would say: There are no dark areas inside myself or in this world which are unreachable to the love of God, neither bad thoughts nor destructive deeds. There are no hells of our lives or of this world, which are completely cut off from the love of God, not even the hells of destroyed relationships, nor the hells of becoming guilty or fearful or desperate, and not even the hells of violence or injustice. Jesus, like in his death, enters right into the midst of all our hells, he stands right beside you and holds you. And all of a sudden you realise that you are able to withstand and that hope remains awake inside you. It may even happen that God revives you right out of the centre of

your hell in the same way as the great fish vomited Jonah into new life. But look: Now one greater than Jonah is here. It is Jesus Christ who defeated death once and for all. New life is possible at any time, doom does not have to last forever. The hells of our lives may eat away at us, but they won't win.

Well, I must admit, as I said earlier on, all this is not an absolutely unambiguous sign after all. It only unfolds through faith and can become unambiguous through trust alone. There is no doubt about this. Faith as well as trust can not be proven for definite. I can only dare to entrust myself to it like a young bird which tries to get into the air and fly.

A little tale tells us that it was the air that once tried to encourage a very young bird to open its wings and fly. The bird anxiously said to the air: "First give me proof that you will carry me." "You will only get proof if you put your trust in me", answered the air. "As long as you stay in your nest, it won't be possible for me to give you proof. You have got to open your wings and let go. Then you will experience that I will carry you." At this the bird swung into the air and was immediately bubbling over with joy: "It is true. I am being carried".

It's the same with believing. Whenever you dare to trust in Jesus and his love, you will burst out in joy: Yes, it is true, I am carried by him, even through all the burdening and puzzling parts of my life. There is no need for any other proof or sign.

Thus I will live, now and forever,

Amen.

Pastor Michael Klatt