

Sunday, March 11, 2018
Third Sunday of Lent, Year B
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“Jews demand signs, and Greeks look for wisdom.”

St. Paul, a Jew living in a Greek world, knew what he was talking about.

The Jews had gotten in the habit of demanding signs because over the centuries they had been given so many. The sign of God's promise to Abraham was the child conceived by his wife Sarah. Signs that God worked through Moses included the plagues that afflicted the Egyptians but spared the Israelites, crossing through the Red Sea, the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night which guided them through the desert, the manna that fed them every morning, and the quail that came up and covered the camp when the people were sick of the manna and demanded something new on the menu. After settling in the Promised Land there was no end of signs that God was powerfully concerned to deliver them-- everything from dew on the fleece of Gideon to the word of Elijah that shut up the heavens allowing no rain to water the earth.

The Jews had been given so many signs that they had come to demand signs to verify whether a prophet was genuine. Nothing wrong with wanting some verification from an alleged prophet. We should test the spirits. But demanding signs can become a technique of evasion. Give us a sign upon request, miracles on demand, or we will not believe.

Jesus had worked many miracles, more than enough to convince the open-minded, but never upon demand as a proof. And so those who did not want to believe could always find something deficient in the evidence they'd been given. Jesus was doing everything one might expect from the Messiah. “Zeal for your house consumes me.” But the temple officials were not about to surrender control of the temple and the lucrative traffic in sacred things that it generated.

“What sign can you show us for doing this?” And they kept demanding. “Come down from that cross if you are the Son of God.” He didn't come down. He died on that cross, which they took as a sign that he was a fraud. A young man named Saul was so convinced by that apparent sign that he began to persecute the followers of Jesus, the false messiah. But a funny thing happened on the way to Damascus. Saul received a sign he hadn't looked for. To his credit he accepted it and began to preach the gospel he had been persecuting.

Yes, Paul knew what he was talking about when he said, “Jews demand signs.”

He also knew how Greeks looked for wisdom. He had been born in Tarsus, a gentile city that, like the whole Roman East, lived and breathed the culture of classical Greece. Paul spoke Greek as well as Hebrew, and he would have been familiar with Socrates and Plato

and Aristotle. Educated Greeks had given up on their mythological gods-- Zeus, Apollo, and all that gang-- and turned to what the mind of man could discover, verify, and apply. They pioneered math and science, history and philosophy, everything that went under the name of wisdom. Some of them had reasoned to the conclusion that the world must have a single, infinite Creator, but they could not reason their way into a saving personal relationship with that Creator. That must come from the other side.

When Paul was in Athens he saw temples dedicated to all the old traditional gods and goddesses, and even came upon an altar dedicated “to an unknown god”. He used it as a springboard for his preaching. “What you unknowingly worship, I proclaim to you.” He got a polite hearing until he got to the part about Jesus being raised from the dead. At that they scoffed. It must have sounded to their sophisticated ears like something from one of their discredited myths. Such things don't happen in the world explained by math and science, in a world understood by history and philosophy. They were too wise for such fables.

Well, perhaps we should excuse them. They were pioneers of science, but they didn't have the advantage of quantum physics to explain how the resurrection of the dead need not violate the laws of nature. Human wisdom is a work in progress, so it can give a false sense of confidence, and even be used as a technique of evasion.

When I applied to the seminary, I was told that I needed some philosophy before starting theology, so I went back to Wright State and became a full-time student of philosophy. And a funny thing happened on my way to Athens. I noticed that every philosopher we studied was utterly convincing, and utterly demolished by the next philosopher we studied. Philosophy is valuable for mental training. People who wallow in New Age mythology and occult practices could use a course in deductive logic. But every logical argument starts from a premise that is taken on faith. Without faith, a firm rock on which to stand, philosophy can get nowhere. So, yes, after slogging through the quick sands of philosophy I was more than ready for theology. What the human mind cannot secure by reason alone, God must reveal. Faith and reason are complementary, two wings on which we are lifted up to the truth.

“Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called” – to those with open minds and receptive hearts, able to see Jesus of Nazareth for who he really is--Christ the power of God, Christ the wisdom of God. “