



We continue our series studying the set of miracles within John's gospels and described as SIGNS. These were 7 notable events, that had a deeper and wider meaning than the event itself, they point from the event, to a significance and meaning beyond the event.

We are to read between the lines to discover a deeper truth

Let's start with **THE SIGN** itself. Whoever this official was, he had heard of the power of Jesus as Lord of nature. He knew of the turning of the water into wine. He believed that Jesus was no ordinary man, and as his son was on death's door, he made his journey to ask Jesus to come to his son's bedside to heal him. Clearly, the official believed that if Jesus was at the bedside of his son, Jesus could heal him. "*Sir, come down before my son dies.*" At this point, the official only believed that Jesus could heal his son if he was actually present at the bedside. For this reason, Jesus tested the man's faith still further in verse 50 "*Go, your son will live.*" This statement challenged the official to take Jesus at His word. We can piece together the nature of the official's response by his reaction to Jesus' statement. Instead of hurrying home as we might expect any anxious father to do in such circumstances, this man was so certain of Jesus that he stayed in Cana for the night. It was not until the next morning that he returned home. However limited the official's faith was when he set out for Cana, it is clear that he now believed in the person of Jesus as the Christ - not only as Lord of nature, but now by this second sign as LORD OF LIFE .

THE SIGNIFICANCE of this sign. Before we get into some specifics concerning this second sign we should reflect first on what John was trying to communicate with the signs, and what the overall purpose, context, and intent of his markedly different gospel is. Any quick reading of the gospels will make plain the Gospel of John is quite different. Scholars argue over the various dimensions of John's very specific curation of the Jesus story. These include his desire to supplement, rather than replicate the Synoptic Gospels, the combating of various heresy's (Gnostic and Docetism) and a distinctly non-Jewish, or Greek gospel that paints the Jesus story against a specifically Greek backdrop. More recently others suggest that this is in fact a mystical, more contemplative reflection similar in style and linguistics to the work of the Jewish mystic community of Qumran found in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

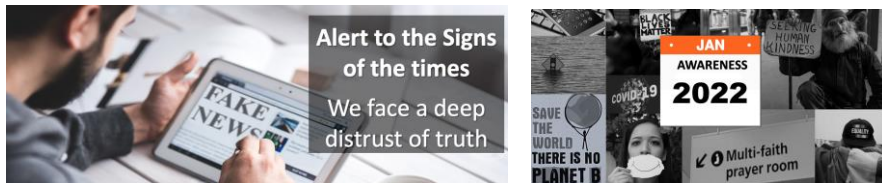


Whatever the precise context is, John himself tells us his overall purpose in John 20:31; "*Jesus performed many other signs which are not recorded in this book, but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have LIFE in his name.*" In short, John is telling the Jesus story with a relevancy, resonance and pertinency that enables and brings about life in His name. So looking specifically at the second sign, he includes this story to point to the true nature of faith. Jesus exposes the limits of a faith based merely on miracles and signs - a faith that cries out "*If only you would ... then I will.*" We have perhaps all prayed this prayer. It's where many of us start out on the journey but that initial faith needs to mature and develop into a faith that is based firstly on the person who works the miracle, and secondly on a trust and reliance on the Word, that He who is the Word of God speaks. (See John 1:14) In short, John uses this sign to illustrate the journey of faith - from a cry of help to taking Jesus at his word, to a belief, and trust in the person.

As I reflected on **THE SIGNPOSTS**, two learnings struck me:

1. **AWARENESS:** Telling our Jesus story with a greater relevancy and resonance.
2. **OPENNESS:** Finding the hidden and deeper meaning, experiencing the word that is life.

Firstly then, **AWARENESS.** We are living in strange times and more so than ever, we need to adapt to tell our Jesus story into a new context. I am reminded of Jesus' challenge in Matt 16:3; "*When evening comes, you say it will be fair weather, for the sky is red and, in the morning, today it will be stormy for the sky is red and overcast. You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.*" We are to be alert and able to discern the signs of the times. Like John, we need to find a fresh way to tell our story that has relevance, and resonance in the context of our times.

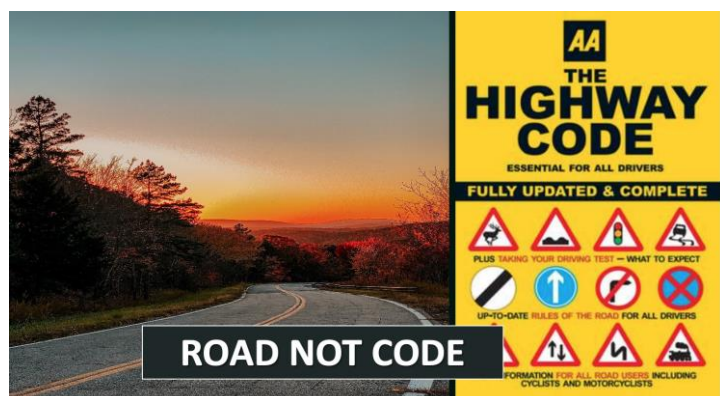


Today the church worldwide is confronted by a huge paradox. On the one hand we face a deep distrust of "truth" - fake news complicates, misinformation multiplies, conspiracy theories flourish, and mixed messages, and compromised sources thrive. The "*dialogue*" of our day is done in anger, and there is little, or no patience for a deeper discussion in our media, or on our social platforms. BUT at the same time, more than ever people are searching for connection, and have a deep thirst for meaning and authentic truth - a spirituality that they can't quite get a handle on. It's into this challenge that the church is trying to speak, trying to convey truth that is expressed in the story of Jesus. Like John, we need to point to truth in context. But too often we sit back and want to turn the clock back and rely on the familiar rather than re-express our story into a changing context. Let me make this plain and real with 2 examples. Firstly, I was talking to Tim Mercer before Christmas. He told me that in a quiz with 20 pupils at the Ashcombe before Christmas not one of them knew that the phrase "*Oh come all ye faithful*" was even a Christmas carol! Let's not be in any doubt we are speaking into a post-Christian culture with only about 5% of the population attending church regularly. Secondly, 40 years ago, I was a member of HTB when the Alpha Course was first being devised back in 1981. A course seeking to provide answers to life's big questions, and it still provides a pathway to faith for many – but I begin to wonder whether we are sometimes answering questions that not many people are asking. Perhaps we need to be brave and create a new pre-Alpha opportunity to explore questions that don't have easy answers, but are real and where people's heads are at. Questions like; *If there is a God, where does God fit into this world that is crumbling around us? Where is a loving God in today's big issues of the environment, science, sexual identity and global health? How do we make sense of Christian identity and claims of uniqueness in a very mixed up, pluralistic society? I am ok with spirituality but why do I need organised religion?* **Unless we can scratch where it's itching, the church will be an ever-decreasing minority group, a voice crying alone in the wilderness. Surely, we must ask people to journey with us, from where they are, not from where we want them to be, or where we assume they are?**

Secondly **OPENNESS**. We need to be open to a deeper and more transformative intake of Jesus' words - to read between the lines and allow the words of Jesus to breathe life into our lives - just as he did to the nobleman's son.

We need to be less cerebral, and less fixed in our thinking. To become more soulful, more contemplative, and more open to be able to receive LIFE from the breath of God in His Word.

Alex has a lovely phrase that says we need to allow God to touch our head, our heart, and our hands. Too often we hide behind a very intellectual and heady pursuit of Christian growth, rather than entering into a more responsive journey of the heart and soul that extends through to our hands and feet.



As I prayed this idea through, I was struck by the words ...
"Road not Code".

As I explored with God what this could mean I felt God was saying that as we journey with Him we should focus more on the open road, the sense of exploration and adventure, the navigation of the bumps in the road, and the sense of freedom, and power to move forward rather than the underlying framework of the Highway Code.

We clearly need both but perhaps our emphasis has been more code than road!

Let's face it, you don't get people excited about the thrill of the open road by handing them a copy of the Highway Code! No, you ask them to jump in for a test drive, and experience the journey with you. John Wimber said the same thing when he said our scriptures are the menu not the meal. Is it a surprise that so few are interested in what we have to offer, if all we have is menus and codes rather than a TRUE ALIVENESS AND A FULLNESS OF LIFE - IN HIS NAME?

Let me close and draw these thoughts together by quoting from Nick Page's brilliant book, The Badly Behaved Bible; ***"We are not supposed to read the bible, we're supposed to inhale it. We are supposed to take it deep down in great gulps of life-giving breath of God. We can argue about meanings and theology and interpretations until we are blue in the face, but we are missing the point - the point is to let the bible breathe God's life into us."***

And then, and only then, might we have the right to speak, the right to journey with others, to have an aliveness and authenticity that encourages others to discover life in His name.

Questions (Choose 3-4 to explore together)

1. What strikes you most about this story?
2. The "Signs" were written by John to point to a significance beyond the event itself. What significance do you see from this sign?
3. Jesus said in Matt 16:3 that we are to read the *"signs of the times"*. What do you see as the signs of our times?
4. How can we be more aware or alert as a church? What could this mean in practise?
5. Do you agree that we are perhaps *"answering questions, people aren't asking"* What do you think are the questions most people have about spirituality and faith today?
6. *"We live in a post-Christian culture where only 5% of people go to church regularly."* What does that say about our mission and methods as a church? (How might we "Go" better?)
7. Does the analogy of "Road not Code" speak to you? What can we learn from this picture?
8. We want God's Word to impact our head, heart, and hands! Discuss Nick Pages quote. How might that change how we approach the bible and allow it to transform and change us?
9. Do we sometimes jump too quickly from the head to the hands, not truly allowing the inner transformation of our heart, our very selves? How does this work for you?
10. Pray together about our awareness as a church, our openness as individuals, and pray that the breath of God might breathe new life and vitality into our walk with Christ.