

READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Donal Dorr

The phrase 'the signs of the times' is attributed to Jesus in the Gospels (Mt. 16:3). It is a term which has come to be used quite a lot by Christians within the past generation. The phrase generally refers to some public current happening which calls our attention to a significant change that is taking place in the world. When we speak of the 'signs of the times' we are not normally referring to happenings that are seen by only a relatively small number of people. The phrase refers rather to important political, social or economic events or developments which are widely known-but whose full significance may not be widely understood.

It is usually assumed that the deeper meaning of the event or trend can be grasped only by those who 'read the sign' in the light of faith. In fact, as Christians understand it, the reading of the signs of the times, is an activity that requires a high degree of faith.

The reason why people are invited to read the signs of the times is in order to help them make a good discernment about how they ought to act. It is of course obvious that any such discernment has to be in accordance with various universal moral values and virtues. However, even full acceptance of all these values and virtues provides us with only a general framework for good behavior. It does not tell us how we should act in any particular situation. That is why we need to make a personal discernment in each specific case. In this context many Christians have come to believe that key events or trends are used by God as signs to enable us to understand something of the deeper meaning of what is taking place in the world. We can then make our discernment in the light of this deeper understanding.

SIGNS

The key point in all this is that these events or trends in the world are signs. A sign is something more than an event. It is a means of communication between intelligent beings. When we speak of 'the signs of the times' we are suggesting that God is sending us a message through these historical events. This means that, if we read the 'signs of the times' correctly, we are being enabled by God to interpret more accurately what is really going on in the world, behind the superficial appearances. Having come to understand something of the deeper significance of the situation we are then in the position to make our decision and to respond to what is going on.

A sign is a communication between people. This means that the 'signs of the times' are more than merely objective historical events. They also have a personal subjective aspect. Here we are dealing with communication between God's Spirit and us humans

who wish to read these signs. The 'message' is always an interpersonal one which involves not just the objective date but also a strong emotional element. As the moral theologian Kevin Kelly says, it involves 'intelligently listening to the deepest hopes and desires, sufferings and anxieties, of the human family today.'

This means that one aspect of the signs is the emotional responses and reactions of people to the events and trends in the world. And we are not just observing these reactions but resonating with them. Kelly is suggesting that it is not a matter of noting the events and responses in a coldly intellectual manner; rather we are allowing ourselves to be profoundly moved by the deep feelings of people as they react to what is happening. Consequently, it is not helpful to make too sharp a distinction between the signs as objective events and our subjective reading of the signs.

The central point here is that the way the 'message' is heard by us is by allowing it to touch our hearts. So, in reading 'the signs of the times', we look first of all at our own feeling response to what is going on in the world and the reactions of people to these events. This is well put by Kevin Kelly who says, 'the signs of the times have to be felt'. He goes on to speak of how the 'the human spirit, moved by God's own Spirit, recoils in horror from whatever is dehumanizing and violating respect for persons in our world today.' Our reaction to what is happening around us is an emotional one, coming in the form of 'anger, repugnance, horror, fear, anxiety, as well as the positive emotions of hope, expectation, determination, courage, etc.'

The implication here is that the Holy Spirit is evoking in us a reaction what is happening- one that is similar in some degree to God's own reaction. When we see and feel people being oppressed or degraded, we share the anger and sadness of God at this violation of human dignity. When we find the Earth being polluted and exploited, once again our reaction of outrage mirrors that of God. On the other hand, when we see people being treated respectfully and observe genuine human development taking place, our joyful reaction is in some sense a share in the delight of God that the world and its people are living and acting in justice and love as God wants us to live.

NOT A CODE

Down through the ages- and perhaps particularly in more recent times- there have been some very misguided ideas about signs sent by God. There are Gnostic groups who believe that they have a secret wisdom which enables them to read signs from God which only they can understand. Some Christian sects or groups believe that the Book of the Apocalypse (Book of Revelation) contains various prophetic signs referring mainly to the end of the world. This is a superstitious and almost magical approach, one which treats sign from God as though they could be deciphered in the way one could decipher a message sent in a code.

A code is an arbitrary extrinsic meaning added on to the normal and intrinsic meaning of something. A genuine Christian 'reading' of the signs is something quite different from interpreting a code. It is not a matter of discovering a meaning added on from outside to something that is happening in the world. It is rather the discernment of a fuller or deeper meaning of an event or trend. It gives us some sense of how it fits into the unfolding of God's plan, which for the Christian is the coming of the Reign of God. It enables us to have at least a glimpse of the way that God sees what is taking place in the world.

I emphasize the word 'glimpse' which I used in the previous sentence. For, despite all our effort to read 'the signs of the times', we still see things only 'through a foggy mirror' (1 Cor 13:12). Nevertheless, even this dim and tentative sense of God's viewpoint gives us some guidance in our discernment. It puts us in a somewhat better position to know how we should respond and how we should play our part in advancing the coming of the Reign of God.

WHICH EVENTS ARE SIGNS?

How are we to know which events are 'signs of the times'? I think the best way to answer this question is to accept that, if we are sensitive to the movements of the Spirit and in harmony with the mind of Jesus, then any event can be seen as such a sign. However, some remarkable happenings are rather obvious 'signs of the times'- so they can be recognized even if we are somewhat slow in heart like the disciples at Emmaus (Lk 24:25).

Some of these signs are encouraging while others are alarming and may be seen as warnings from God. The signing of the Good Friday peace agreement in Northern Ireland in 1998 was a very good sign of the times. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as president of a free-multi-racial South Africa in 1994 would also count as encouraging signs. Among the more alarming signs are the '9/11' attack on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001, hurricane Katrina which devastated New Orleans in 2005, and the recent rapid melting of the Greenland ice-cap.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit we can interpret even the very frightening 'signs of the times' in the context of our Christian hope. We believe that God's plan for us and for our world is a benevolent one and that 'God can write straight with crooked lines'. The challenge for us is to see what positive good is to be drawn out of events which at first sight seem utterly negative. For example, we may perhaps see the melting of the Arctic icecap as a wake-up call to us to change our environmentally damaging lifestyle. And we may see '9/11' as a warning that the peoples of the 'the West' need to take urgent action to remedy the plight of the Palestinian people and, more generally, of the poor of the

world. Perhaps also we should interpret it as an indication that we in the West should engage in serious political and religious dialogue with Muslim countries and peoples.

TENTATIVE

I have used the word 'perhaps' twice in the previous paragraph. This is an indication that there has to be tentative quality to the way we interpret 'signs of the times.' It is important to hold in our minds that in all our attempts to read the signs, we are dealing with the mystery that Christians call God. And, as I have said, in anything to do with this mystery we can only see in a hazy way as in a fogged mirror (cf. 1 Cor 13:12).

Furthermore, we have to allow for the fact that many of our judgments are made on the basis of unwarranted assumptions which we have failed to question. All of us are prejudiced in one way or another. Some of our prejudices are purely personal. Others are biases which are common to whole groups of people. For instance, very many upper and middle class people are prejudiced in assuming that they know better than the poor what is good for society.

FAITH, NOT DIVINATION

In all of this, there is one crucial point which I wish to emphasize: reading the signs of the times' is an act of faith, not divination. What I mean by this may perhaps become clear by looking at two possible analogies from the secular world. The first of these is the way a water-diviner interprets the tremor in his or her hands as sign that there is water under the ground. I want to say that this is not a good analogy for our reading of the 'signs of the times.'

A far more appropriate analogy can be found if we look at a situation where I am given a gift by another person. If the giver is somebody whom I do not trust, or whom I know does not like me, then I may suspect that the person is trying to bribe me. On the other hand, if the giver of the gift is a close friend, or is somebody in whom I have full trust, then I interpret the gift as a sign of the giver's love or gratitude or respect. The point is that in both cases I 'read' the meaning of the gift in the light of my prior relationship with the other.

In much the same way, our reading of the 'signs of the times' is done entirely in the light of our prior faith and trust in God. One might even say that we are reading a particular meaning into what is happening around us. We are assuming that God's hand is at work in the situation. **We are also assuming that God is communicating with us through what is happening- and that the message is one which is designed to help us.** But

it depends mainly on ourselves whether we are inclined to interpret this help as encouragement or as a warning- or even, perhaps, as punishment.

Does this understanding of our reading of 'the signs of the times' empty it of all real significance? Does it mean that the signs are so ambiguous and our reading so tentative that the whole process is of no real help in our discerning of how we ought to act? At first sight it may seem so. But perhaps we should think of the way relationships play out between people who are deeply in love with each other. Each of them is willing to devote endless hours of picking up clues which may throw light on how the other is feeling about particular issues or about the world in general. Do they see this as a pointless exercise, a waste of time? Not at all. They experience it as one of the many ways in which their love for each other is expressed and nourished. Similarly, our attempts to read the mind of God is examining 'the signs of the times' is a way in which we manifest and deepen our faith and give expression to our preoccupation with the things of God.

But can this help us in the process of discernment? Yes it can- but not in the obvious way of giving us clear instructions about how to act. Rather it draws us more deeply into an exploration of the mind and heart of God. And, when we come to think of it, perhaps that is what God is most concerned about. As we are drawn more and more deeply into the love and the interests of God, we become increasingly sensitive to inspirations of the Spirit in regard to which of our possible actions are most in conformity to God's will for us and for the world. The result is that the most important element in our process of discernment is no longer our own attempt to read the signs; it is rather the **movements of the Holy Spirit in our minds and hearts.**

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