
SIGNS OF LIFE AND HOPE

**West Epping Uniting Church
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John 2:1-11

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If you see a Red Cross sign what do you think? Do you know what the purpose of this symbol is? Well, it's to effectively say don't shoot.....we are non-combatants, we are here to help.....we are on a humanitarian mission!



What about the next symbol? What does it say? It's a universal symbol used to indicate the item concerned can be recycled. It means, come on, look after the planet, do the right thing, be a good, responsible citizen!



We now venture into the animal kingdom. The symbol of the lion indicates courage and strength. It says, look out we mean business. You better take note!



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The symbol of the dove points to harmony and tranquillity. It says we are here to make peace.....we are here to reconcile and unite.



Now, what about these next two popular symbols? When you look at these what comes to mind.?

The big “M” or to say more colloquially, the “golden arches”, points to a hamburger joint, a convenient feeding place along the way. For us more seasoned travellers or for travellers with young children, it announces the arrival a of a nice clean and very welcome toilet stop!



And the apple with the bite taken out refers to, off course, the Apple Corporation and to computing in general.



Meanwhile, here in Australia as we drive long distances, we may be confronted with this old, chugging steam engine. It means caution, reduce your speed. There is a rail crossing ahead and one must be on guard. The train is not going to stop for you!



And then there is the boxing kangaroo. This appears at many sporting events these days. It signifies the Australian fighting spirit, our willingness to have a go and to take it up to the opposition.



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Signs and symbols play an important part in our lives. The early Christians, especially during the period of persecution, identified one another with the use of the Ichthus – a secret fish-like symbol with a name that is an acronym derived from the Greek equivalent of “Jesus Christ Son of God Saviour”. These days we see this symbol often on the rear window of cars, on Bibles or other items.



Then there was the Chi Rho, a symbol formed by the overlay of the first two letters of the name “Christ” in Greek. This came to signify Jesus the Christ and became a universal symbol for Christians or followers of Jesus around the world.



And then there is the cross, the universal sign of God’s unconditional love for all humankind.



Today we read a story from the Gospel of John. This Gospel is a fascinating account of Jesus’ life as a lot of symbolism used here. Every text is layered with levels of meaning. There is a richness and beauty in John’s Gospel that simply goes unmatched.

The early part of John’s Gospel is sometimes referred to as the “Book of Signs” as there are seven particular events serving this purpose.

There is the wedding at Cana and the miracle of Jesus changing water into wine (as we read today) (John 2:1-11). There is the healing of the official’s son in Capernaum (John 4:46-54), the healing of the paralysed man at Bethesda (John 5:1-15), the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:5-14), Jesus walking on water (John 6:16-24), the healing of the blind man (John 9:1-17) and the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-45).

Each of these events reveals something about the human condition and our needs. Importantly, and they point to something significant about Jesus. They reveal important things about who Jesus is and what his mission is all about.

Some suggest the story of Jesus changing water into wine addresses quite an important issue of the day. This concerns a loss of face and the onset of shame. For, to run out of wine at a wedding feast was considered to be very poor form.

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It was a bit like the bride not turning up at the church, the best man losing the ring or the minister getting the time and date wrong!

Then, in the case of the healing miracles, we see Jesus dealing with the matter of sickness and death while the feeding of the 5,000 and the miracle of the loaves and fishes highlights Jesus' ability to meet one's every need. The amazing scene, where Jesus walks on water, points to the truth that Jesus is not confined or subject to the physical elements of this world.

There are other events in the early chapters of John's Gospel that also brim with significant symbolic sense. Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan women at the well (John 4:7-26) is not just about giving someone a drink. It speaks volumes about the value of the outsider, new beginnings, new life and life that is both enriched and abundant.

Jesus' famous encounter with Nicodemus also speaks about such things as the reality of new birth and new life is affirmed (John 3:1-10). And then there is the scene where Jesus cleanses the temple. Here we witness a symbolic action that points to the revelation of a new temple which is Jesus himself, resurrected from the dead.

Friends, I don't want to bewilder you with too many references. But the point here is this. Almost every word, every text, every story in John's Gospel is layered with many rich, profound meanings that speak to us today in the trials, the challenges and the joys that we encounter.

In the story of the wedding in Cana we encounter references to abundance where there is scarcity. We receive a glimpse of what God's kingdom is all about as this kingdom is commonly likened to a wedding banquet. We touch on references to Holy Communion as we share the cup of the Lord's blessing and we are encouraged to consider how the old is now transformed into the new.



I am not going to explain all these things in detail. I suggest you go home and read the text again carefully and prayerfully. You will be enriched!

Friends, John specifically refers to these amazing events as being "signs". The Greek word here is "semeia". It's where we get the term "semiotics" from and it refers to an image, an illustration or an event that is given to confirm or to authenticate something. It's meant to point beyond itself to something more profound and greater.

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And so, in John's Gospel we encounter Jesus not only as the one who miraculously changes water into wine, we witness him as the "Light of the World", the "Bread of Life", "the Good Shepherd", the "True Vine, the "Way, the Truth and the Life" and the "Resurrection and the life".

All these statements, all these claims, serve to point beyond themselves and their specific context to the person of Jesus, to who he is, to what he is all about.

Here we encounter the one who, where there is darkness, brings light. Here we meet the one who, where there is scarcity and hunger, grants our daily needs. Here we face the one who, where there is peril and threat, cares for us.

Here we acknowledge the one, who, where there is decline and decay, offers us sustenance and growth, who, where there is confusion and accusations of fake news, shows us the way and offers us the truth, who, where there is death and a loss of hope, gives us life and a real future in this world and the next.

All these signs, all this rich symbolism that oozes out of John's Gospel is offered to us as a means of understanding Jesus. It is given as a way of understanding what Jesus means for each one of us.

When I think about the importance of such signs, I am reminded of a story an old lady told me one day when I was visiting a refugee camp in North Sulawesi, a region in the north of Indonesia. It was a troubling scene as thousands of Christians fled the tiny island of Ternate in the Moluccas. They were now living in a huge warehouse on the outskirts of an industrial estate. Each family was allotted a series of timber pallets to sleep on. Food was provided in a huge communal kitchen and bathroom facilities were very basic. Children were vulnerable to all sorts of diseases and the old were simply tired and weary from the horrendous journey they had to take by sea.

This old lady ran up to me waving a huge bunch of keys. Chattering vigorously in Indonesian, she told me how she had a narrow escape as Islamist militia attacked and burned her home. She went on to tell me how their lovely church was set alight and torched. The old lady informed me that her husband was the church warden, the keeper of the keys. He had handed these over to her just before he was mercilessly rounded up and executed. And now this old lady kept these keys in safe keeping.



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I thought for a moment. What a sad story. What's the point of keeping a huge bunch of keys that unlock the door of a church that has been burnt down?

And then it hit me. These keys are much more than simple metal objects used to unlock the doors of a church. They are an important symbol for this lady and her community of displaced people. They are a sign of hope that, one day, they will return home. One day they will rebuild their lives in a time of peace.

And you know, peace did come to this part of Indonesia. Many people did return home. Lives and churches were rebuilt.

Friends that huge bunch of keys were a sign of hope for that old woman and her community. And so are those words, those stories and those events we witness in John's Gospel today.

The account of Jesus turning water into wine, the healing of the paralysed man in Bethesda, the feeding of the 5,000, the sighting of Jesus walking on water, the statements that "I am the Light of the World", "The Bread of Life", "The Good Shepherd", "The True Vine", "The Way the Truth and the Life", and "The Resurrection and the Life", are all meant to point beyond their immediate context and interpretation to say something rich and profound to us about Jesus - today.

They are meant to say something very important about who Jesus is, to what Jesus is all about. They are there to help us understand what Jesus means for each one of us - now.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, what does all this say to you? How to the symbols, the signs and the layers of meaning presented in John's Gospel help you to know and experience Jesus today?

Think about it. Reflect on it. And pray about it.

And with all these things in mind, ask yourself these questions - where will I go with this? What am I going to do about this? What difference will this make in my life?

Amen.

