

JESUS' MIRACLES – STUMBLING BLOCK OR ROAD TO FAITH?

I am going to talk about miracles today, beginning with a **story of my family**. Robert Mountounet, 77, is my father in law, who in October 2003 was diagnosed with terminal cancer of the lymph nodes. He was told that with 6 months of chemotherapy, his life might be extended by at most 12 months. On our visit to Brittany in late August, we were told the news that his cancer was eradicated – puzzled doctors now think he could live 10 years or more. Many prayers were said for his recovery and his wife in particular would pray over him for an hour every day. What do we make of that? What would Christians say nowadays? Good chemicals or good God?

As we all know, one of the most striking aspects of **Jesus' ministry on earth was the miracles he performed**. These included miraculous healings (like the woman cured of incessant bleeding), casting out of demons (like the Gerasene man), control over nature (such as calming the storm) or raising of individuals from the dead (like Lazarus).

Why did Jesus perform miracles? First, I think that they had an essential role to play in his message that the **Kingdom of God was at hand**, as foreshadowed in the Old Testament.

By doing miracles, he showed God's love for all of humanity. Remember that the Jews were expecting God to establish his kingdom through his Messiah throughout much of the Old Testament. Following Isaiah, characteristics of the Kingdom are as set out in Jesus' sermon in Luke 4:16-17: "'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'"

In a sense, this text – Jesus' first sermon - foreshadows many of his miracles. By miraculous healing Jesus was releasing those **oppressed** by disease – or more explicitly the **blind**. They were among the most downtrodden of society, despised by the religious authorities because they saw sickness as a punishment for sin. By exorcising demons he is **setting free the prisoners** – mankind enslaved by sin. Raising individuals from the dead saved them from the ultimate form of **oppression** – that by death – and underline his teaching about eternal life.

Meanwhile Jesus' control over nature is part of the good news to the poor and the proclamation of the **year of the Lord's favour**. Think of Jesus changing water to wine,

feeding multitudes, generating miraculous catches of fish and calming the storm. God is in control of our lives and not an impersonal force – and God loves to give good gifts. The nature miracles also indicate that Jesus has come to release fallen creation as well as mankind from the power of sin – what Lewis (1947) calls the “miracles of the new creation”. And finally the feeding of the 5,000 foreshadows the promise of plenty for the faithful spoken of in Revelation 19:9 ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’.

Overall, these “deeds” were essential to accompany Jesus’ words in helping people to understanding his message of the kingdom, and helping them realise that he was the Messiah of whom Isaiah had spoken.

A second reason for Jesus to perform miracles was to **show his divinity**, so that people would believe in him. After the miracle of water and wine, John writes “This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.” When he is preparing to revive Lazarus, Jesus says “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.” (John 11:4). Let me give two more examples of how Jesus showed his divinity following miracles; first, after the feeding of the 5,000 he proclaimed “I am the living bread that came down from heaven” (John 6:51); second, during the healing of the blind man (John 9:5) he said “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world”

Third, a most important function of the miracles Jesus performed in his lifetime was to **prepare us for the ultimate miracle, which was his resurrection from the dead**. Its centrality to the whole Christian faith and to salvation is stressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:17 “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins”. If Christ had not performed miracles in his lifetime – including raising the dead – our acceptance of the resurrection would be all the harder.

Finally, Jesus’ miracles **foreshadow the fulfilment of his promises to his followers** after his Ascension (John 14:12) “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.” This passage, its subsequent fulfilment in Acts following Pentecost underline that miracles were not to be acts of Jesus alone. Those acting in his name – effectively under the banner of the Kingdom of Heaven - would themselves be empowered to carry out miracles.

Let's recall Acts 3, just after Pentecost; "One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer--at three in the afternoon. Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him." See how the miracle, performed in Jesus' name, not only helped the needy but led others to faith.

I now want to address some key **contemporary objections to miracles**. Why might they be a stumbling block to people today?

Scepticism about miracles grew up during the enlightenment, when it became a fixed belief that there were **laws of nature** based on normal and experimentally repeatable patterns of cause and effect that could not be broken. Since miracles are in effect suspensions of these laws, they were "impossible". David Hume, the Scottish philosopher, was one of the first to put forward this view. There is a philosophical as well as a scientific problem here, not just whether miracles happen but whether a miracle can be logically defined. It is clearly important to acknowledge this view, which still pervades much of our thinking. Many would rather claim their senses have failed than admit a miracle.

More recently it seems that both science and popular culture have become much more **receptive to the idea of miracles**. In the case of science, we have, for example, the development of Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty that stress that the "laws of nature" are not as fixed as previously thought. One may also note astrophysical theories of the beginning of the universe that suggest that six more dimensions that the four we perceive were present – which inter alia make sense of Jesus' omnipresence and ability to perform miracles when followers pray in his name today (Ross 2000). Meanwhile, the growth of New Age beliefs, misconceived as they are, have imported the miraculous and the spiritual world generally

back into our culture via the mysticism of the East. People are accordingly more receptive to the possibility of miraculous events.

Another ground for scepticism about miracles may be **doubt about the integrity of the authors of the Bible and the texts that have come down to us**. I would note that the Bible texts have come under intense scrutiny from which they have emerged very well, as for example being written close to the event and hence unlikely to have myths about miracles appended. The events of Jesus' life are related in a "matter of fact" and "fitting" way. I would also reply here that the greatest miracle – the resurrection – is the one that is most strongly attested to, with the reference in 1 Corinthians 15:6 for example "After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep." The resurrection was also reported by non-Christians such as Josephus and attested to by the willingness of the Apostles to die for Jesus' sake. Acceptance of the resurrection – the cornerstone of the Christian faith, lends powerful support to the other miracles.

I would also suggest that we should also consider the miracle which is all around us – God's creation itself. Close consideration of the design features of the universe and of life as stressed in Ross (2001) decisively rejects the possibility that what we see arises from chance. As the Father acted, so did the son in Colossians 1:15-16 "For by him all things were created...he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Even if we believe in miracles in Biblical times there are many Christians who consider that **miracles ceased at the time of the apostles**. This is I think a sad misinterpretation of certain texts such as 2 Corinthians 12:12 "The things that mark an apostle--signs, wonders and miracles--were done among you with great perseverance." As is this showed only an apostle to perform wonders. In fact we know that miracles have been performed by saints and other believers throughout church history, and miracles are still being performed by Jesus' followers speaking in his name today. Heidi Baker is an American missionary in Mozambique whose work has led to a huge revival of faith in that country. Let me read to you from a time when due to government action she was confined to a small space with 100 orphans and no food (p52).

There are authenticated cases of raising from the dead in Africa and China (also covered in Baker's book); one can watch miracles occur around TV evangelist Benny Hinn and many

authenticated miracles have occurred in the Airport church in Toronto. Speaking personally, beyond my father in law's cure that I cited at the start, I have met a woman who was dying of cancer when the tumours abruptly disappeared after prayer, to the bafflement of doctors. I have been part of a session of praying round a house which ended in a form of exorcism of a very active spirit (that pushed me against the wall)- after which the children of the house stopped habitual nightmares.

Can miracles happen in our own lives? The answer is yes. God wants us to do miracles, in gratitude for our salvation as emphasised in James 2:26 "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead". But we need faith for God to act. In Mark 6:5-6 in Galilee it is recorded that "He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith." Remember that a central message of Jesus is that if we have faith in him our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled to God. Faith in this sense is not just trust in him but a willingness to accept the need for personal change and adoption of God's ways. Indeed, we should remember that the change in lives – including my own, as a consequence of becoming a Christian is also a miracle that forms a testimony to the other miracles in the Bible.

To sum up, both Jesus' miracles and those performed today confirm the truth of the Gospel message, help those in need and bring glory to God. They complement preaching the Gospel even as the early church cried out "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." (Acts 4:29). Miracles are indeed a road to faith and need not be a stumbling block. Let us not be shy in acknowledging both Jesus' miracles and those of today..

References:

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