

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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On Miracles

Background to the preaching of this sermon.

I had prepared for a two-sermon series on the topic of Saints and Miracles, given the appointed scripture readings for these two Sundays in July, with the feeding of the 5000, walking on water, Elijah and Elisha, and previously, Amos, the shepherd and tree tender who had no idea of his upcoming role as a prophet. Saints would come first, focusing on Elisha, and then miracles defined and compared, they still happen, and God often uses the un-suspecting.

All was ready until I heard the lector at the early Sunday service (whom I had prompted to feel free to read dramatically the story of Elijah's chariot of fire assumption into heaven). He read a different Old Testament lesson, and I knew immediately I had the weeks and thus the lessons reversed, and the sermon wouldn't work, since it was as much an exposition of the Elijah story as other. I said so to the adult acolyte next to me at the dais; he seemed to have enough confidence in me to whisper back, "I'm sure you can do a workaround." ! And then he went and sat down in the first pew in the nave, just waiting and smiling.

I only had one option which was do Miracles first. It wasn't quite extemporaneous, in that I had already preached specifically on miracles a few times, and I had already done preliminary work on what I thought was the next week's sermon. So I preached it to the 8 o'clockers. It wasn't everything I had planned for it, but it preached, and on my way to the pulpit had prayed even harder that each word from my lips would be attached by the Holy Spirit, so that the listener received what the Holy Spirit intended for them to hear, just for them that day.

In between the services, I went to my office, took my notes for the next week, and quickly typed things together for the second Mass' sermon. I made use of the story related by blogger Bob Deffinbaugh (thanks, Bob), redacting personal names, as well as made use of some material from a couple of old teachings, severely editing to bring the sermon into a usual time frame. My apologies that the sermon is raw in its crafting, obviously, as I took the time framed that I had, 45 minutes, to put it together.

My apologies to the parish for getting turned around like that. I think it has only happened once before. And I'm very willing to concede that the Holy Spirit wanted this order in the first place, and I just wasn't listening close enough. To God be the glory. RGE+

The usual summary/interest creating introduction I provide just before a short prayer was in fact extemporaneous, and included some of what I've provided above, as an explanation to my mistake, plus a sentence from what was now the following week's sermon (for July 29, 2018, which I encourage you to read!)

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Lord, let your word only be spoken, and your word only be heard. Amen.

Bob Deffinbaugh tells the story about when he was a student in seminary, and a well-known speaker spoke to the entire student body. In an effort to distinguish between what he understood as Class A and Class B miracles, the respected speaker told the true story of a young pilot named Tom (now with Missionary Aviation Fellowship) who was flying at 30,000 feet when his plane exploded. All in the plane were killed except Tom. As Tom was plummeting to the earth, he pulled the rip cord, but his chute failed to open. At the last minute, the chute did open but it was in shreds, hardly breaking the speed of his fall.

Meanwhile, on the ground below, a Christian woman was standing in her driveway watching this horrifying scene. Knowing he was in desperate trouble, the woman prayed for his safe descent. Tom, needless to say, was praying, too. Tom landed virtually at the feet of the woman. Looking up, they saw that the ropes of his parachute had caught in two trees, breaking his fall and lowering him gently to the ground.

The most interesting point about this true story is that the speaker used it as an illustration of what he called Class B miracles. After recounting the story, the speaker said to the assembled faculty and (male) student body, "Now men, don't be overly impressed by the Class B miracles."

Hard not to be impressed by such powerful examples of God's intervention.

Well, answers to prayer mean you have people who are willing to pray believing that God can do something different than what otherwise might happen. But I wouldn't call those Class B miracles. For one thing I wouldn't want to diminish any sense of any kind of miracle; A miracle is a miracle. But this was not a miracle; it was an answer to prayer that meant making use of already existing circumstances, as God allowed. In this case, ropes and trees. Even if the possibility of such was not in anybody's mind.

Miracles however, are physic bending events. Walking on water, changing water into wine. And feeding 5000 people from 5 loaves and 2 fishes.

It was, as it turned, out the academic speaker's weak attempt at humor. But the sad truth is that many theologians in the history of the church, especially the last 150 years, have not taken any of the miracles of our Lord seriously. And thus the witness is given to the Church, that either they didn't really happen, or they happened then and not now, or there's no way we peons could ever or should ever consider ourselves as participating in their existence.

The thing is, according to the bible, in both Old and New Testaments, miracles are incredibly important as demonstrations of God's power, and the miracles of our Lord are an essential part of the presentation of him as Messiah, for, in part, they authenticate His claim as Messiah. And guess what, He still is the Messiah, and he is alive! So, we should still expect them to take place. Nothing says otherwise.

Let's take a quick look at where and how miracles are mentioned in the gospels.

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The miraculous works of our Lord Jesus were communicated by the gossellers and by those who followed through the New Testament history and epistles, by the use of three primary terms, each of which accentuated one particular facet of this supernatural activity of Christ. These three terms are even found together in several passages. “Men of Israel” said St Peter on Pentecost, “listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know”, but also found in Paul’s writings to the Corinthians (*2nd letter, Chapter 12*), and Thessalonians (*2nd letter, Chapter 2*).

The term ‘miracle’ (translated from the Greek *dunamis*, from which is derived the English *dynamic*), emphasizes the “mighty work” that has been done, and, in particular, the power by which it was accomplished. The event is thus described in terms of “the power of God in action.”

If ‘miracle’ emphasizes the cause of the miraculous event, ‘wonder’ (translated from the Greek *teras* which also carries the sense of ‘monstrous’), underscores its effect on those who are witnesses. On many occasions, the crowds (even the disciples) were amazed and astonished by the works of our Lord (see [Mark 2:12; 4:41; 6:51](#), etc., etc.). The ancient theologian Origen pointed out long ago that this term ‘wonder’ is never employed alone in the New Testament, but always coupled up with some other term which suggests something far greater than a mere exhibition of curiosity.

The term that seems to have the most interconnection of meanings used with reference to the miracles of our Lord is ‘sign’ (semeion, as in the sign of Jonah, which refers the actual miraculous experience of Jonah, as the Lord intended for it to be understood centuries later with Jesus); it focuses upon the deeper meaning or higher purpose of the miracle. So, a sign is a miracle which conveys a truth about our Lord Jesus. A miracle is usually a sign, but a sign need not always be a miracle (see the *2nd chapter of Luke*).

All that background to say this: the miracles of our God are at one and the same time a visible manifestation of divine power (miracle) an awe-inspiring spectacle (wonder), and an instructive revelation about God (sign).

There are quite a few characteristics of the Miracles performed by Jesus , but I want to share 3 in particular

The only way we can talk about the particular characteristics of the Miracles of Jesus Christ, I suppose, is to admit that there were what we could call “miraculous deeds” around the time of the Incarnation and through to the Ascension. And certainly as we look into the Old Testament we can see what you might call the “battle of the miraculous”, as with Moses and the plagues, and the wizards of Egypt keeping up for a while replicating those same things. It was quite the wonder, don’t you think, when the snake of Moses ate up the snakes of Egypt. There is much here to say about the deceptions of the Enemy, Satan, and the magic arts, as with Simon the

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Magician, and more. But simple observation and investigation tells us that the miracles which He accomplished were far different than those claimed by other religions.

First, we can say they were truly historical. In the Gospel accounts, and throughout the Bible, so no variation here, the writers have not presented the miracles of our Lord as anything other than actual events. They are not quote-unquote true myths, that is, mythical stories with ‘spiritual lessons,’ but real events which equally conveyed spiritual truths or purpose. The Miracles of other religions are far more mythical in nature. The ones shared are pointed to as happened already. Though perhaps not precisely stated, we can sense a kind of ‘once upon a time’ mood. Otherwise, whatever phenomenon may be presented as current, “right now”, they eventually fail, or show themselves to be manipulated. Not so in the Gospels, and the rest of the Bible.

Second, to use one of our favorite Anglican terms, Jesus’ miracles were reasonable. The miracles of the Apocryphal Gospels are fantastic and questionable. They are completely out of character, with Jesus arbitrarily and capriciously using His supernatural powers. In contrast, the Gospels show a highly ethical use of His power, in a way totally consistent with His person.

Third, they were immensely useful. Almost every miracle of our Lord Jesus was designed to meet a physical need. Our Lord refused to employ His powers to satisfy His own appetites, or to ensure His protection. He turned down every invitation to do the miraculous to satisfy idle curiosity.

Besides characteristics, there are some particular Purposes of the miracles that emerge from the Scriptures.

For one thing, They attracted people of all sorts and kinds, men, women and children. Every supernatural act of Jesus was meant to be complimentary to the mission of proclamation of the Good News. And so as a obvious result, those men and women attracted to the buzz about his miracles, and healings and exorcisms, were then going to hear his message. And those who were anxious to hear His message, found the message validated and affirmed by miracles and more. For instance, in the 4th chapter of Matthew it was the miraculous and the healing ministry of Jesus which drew the multitudes to the place where the Sermon on the Mount was delivered.

At the least, up front, His deeds were seen to many at least as those of a prophet ; here was a man with a message from God.

For another thing, as mentioned, the miracles gave divine validation to Jesus. It was expected that when the Messiah came He would validatingly perform miracles. When Jesus presented Himself at the synagogue in Nazareth, and gave fair warning when he quoted a passage from Isaiah chapter 61:

“And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book, and found the place where it was written, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me.’ ([Luke 4:17-19](#)) .

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The people expected the Messiah to present Himself by signs. Even the Son of God's power over demons demonstrates the coming of the Kingdom: "But if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you". And then the accompanying kicker, from the 10th chapter of John, when Jesus said that by reason of His work alone, men should receive Him as Messiah.

And a third thing, the miracles reveal God. As I mentioned already, the miracles of Jesus were not merely deeds to authenticate the message of Messiah, but a vital part of that message. The miracles not only revealed the power of God, but His person, who he is and is to come. Further, In the miracles of Jesus we see the sympathy and compassion of God. Jesus was deeply moved by human suffering and need. These needs prompted Him to action. Again, the miracles reveal Jesus to be the Redeemer and Restorer of a fallen universe. He came to save, and it is the power of HIS kingdom which he makes use of, not the power of THIS world.

Finally, the miracles, and all the other phenomenon of the Kingdom of God, became the platform for what God expected to see in the followers of the Son of God, after the ascension.

And this becomes point especially becomes our application. You see, the saints of God are just folk like you and me, able to talk about Jesus, and able to be vessels through which God works his wonders and signs and miracles. I can say that to you by recalling the scriptures:

- 1) Jesus said, "Greater things than these shall you do." And if Jesus could pass a loaf of bread around to just his apostles after blessing it and saying, This is my body, but then Paul can affirm the same action for all believers so they can also receive the Real Presence of Christ, but not be those apostles, then Jesus can say to his disciples, "Greater things than these shall you do" to his apostles, and Paul can later affirm that reality for all those disciples who follow, but are not apostles themselves.
- 2) Pentecost came and the Holy Spirit descended getting that Holy Church kick started, including providing a variety of spiritual gifts, which would be God's power initiated by and through his people.
- 3) The gifts of the spirit in the body of Christ today continue to do the same as before (as in those greater things spoken of by Christ, now seen as a normal and regular function of the power of the holy spirit)
- 4) And here is the particular point regarding how we define the Saints, but already hear that we are all gifted, SOME of us are gifted by the Holy Spirit to be miracle workers, that is, workers of miracles, according to the writers of the New Testament.

And the difficulty in the application only resides with us.

We need to open our understanding and invite Christ to stir up in us those gifts. None is more important than others, although, obviously, miracle workers throughout the life of the Church (and bible) gain much more attention as SAINTS.

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So let me repeat the teaching of the Scriptures, and affirmed in the teaching of the Church, that First, ALL are given the special abilities of the Holy Spirit to do something or act in some way for the benefit of the church

And Second, A FEW of us have received the special ability to be miracle workers.

Finally, for today, since we will talk about the Saints next Sunday, If you have seen something happen through your own ministry that may be otherwise unexplainable, then it may be you who is so gifted.

Your job then is to keep your eyes open and be prepared to step out in faith – which may take something of a learning process, I won't deny – but still, to step out in faith and be Gods's next miracle worker for the sake of his Kingdom.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

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