

Miracles

Readings: Psalms 65 verses 1-6; Mark chapter 4 verses 35-41

Miracles are a problem area. Many Christians rejoice in them! They evidence the power of God and they 'prove' the divinity of Christ. But many Christians don't know what to make of them. They raise fundamental questions about the nature of the world we live in, and about the 'fairness' of God. Why a miracle for this person and not someone else? In this sermon I just want to take an 'over-view' of miracles. The history of interpretation has moved through 3 cycles:

Uncritical Acceptance

For many centuries Christians accepted the miracle stories without question. The world they lived in was full of such 'miracle' stories, they were two a penny in every religion and anyway, an Almighty God could be expected to work miracles as a matter of course. Miracles were common-place.

Critical Rejection

Then came the 'scientific revolution' of the 16th Century. Science taught us that we live in an ordered and predictable universe. We are governed by laws of nature which are invariable; without them life would be impossible. So the hymn writer wrote:

*"Laws which never shall be broken
For their guidance he has made."*

On this basis miracles (defined as a breaking of the laws of nature) were impossible. They did not happen. There must be some reasonable explanation. So the miracles were explained away and those which couldn't be explained were simply dismissed as the stuff of legend or fevered imagination.

Exit miracles! In the light of scientific knowledge solid iron axe-heads do not float down rivers; the sun does not 'stand still' in the heavens; the atomic structure of fish and bread does not allow for endless multiplication sufficient to feed 5,000 men plus women and children! King Canute acts in the middle of a thunderstorm at sea simply don't work!

A Compromise Position

Such outright rejection of the miraculous leaves many Christians uncomfortable. It requires us to excise a third of the Gospel story! So a compromise position emerged. Accepting that miracles were a contradiction of the laws of nature Christians came up with a qualification. They were "contrary to the known laws of nature." That allowed room for manoeuvre. But it is a cop-out. It allowed for a "God of the Gaps" theology to emerge. And that is ultimately disastrous. If God is only used to fill in the gaps in our knowledge then it is only a matter of time before our expanding knowledge fills in the gaps and "God" is pushed to the periphery and beyond.

Breaking the Mould

A new line of thought was opened up when people realised that we were asking the wrong question. Instead of asking "Could God / Jesus have done this?" they suggested we ask "Would God / Jesus have done this"? Asking this opens up a new dimension of understanding. Instead of debating whether something was possible in the light of scientific knowledge we are debating whether it is consistent with the character and nature of God.

On this basis the 'healing miracles' of Jesus can be accepted without question. God's will is health and wholeness for everyone. And it was noted that many of these 'miracles' were preceded by the phrase "and Jesus had compassion". Compassionate love was the very essence of His nature.

And, on this basis, some of the 'miracle' stories in the Gospels don't pass the 'character test'. What's the point in cursing a fig tree and withering it for not bearing fruit out of season?

Significant Events

This opens up another approach and it is the one John uses throughout his gospel. He even uses another word for 'miracle'! For John the miracles are described as "signs". Thus the turning of water into wine is described as a 'sign' of the newness that Jesus brings. The Feeding of the 5,000 is a 'sign' that Jesus is the Bread of Life.

By definition a sign points beyond itself. On my way here this morning there is a sign outside Hitchin – "Stotfold". But I would be stupid to think that I had arrived in Stotfold at that point — there is another 4 miles to go! So John sees the miracles as "significant events". It is an event pregnant with the Presence of God. It makes us aware of God.

This understanding is helpful because it means that ordinary, everyday events could be described as "miraculous". So the birth of a baby is a 'miracle' even though it is perfectly normal and can be explained. On this understanding miracles are all around us every day. An event doesn't have to be extra-ordinary and inexplicable to be a miracle. It is miraculous if we sense God within it.

Which means there is always an ambiguity about a miracle. The supreme miracle was the incarnation of God in Jesus. But to many people, Jesus was just another man, no different from any other man. But others sensed that, in encountering Jesus, they encountered God. And many attributed the authority with which Jesus taught as being God's. For them "God was in Christ" and that realisation changed their lives.

With this in mind we shall be looking at some of the 'miracles' in the Gospels in coming weeks — seeking their significance for us today.