

Acts 5: 12-16 The Apostles heal many - Littlebourne Chapel, 9 October 2022 – Peter Hollander

¹² The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. ¹³ No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. ¹⁵ As a result, people brought those who were ill into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. ¹⁶ Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing those who were ill and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.

We're leaving the psalms of ascent for a few weeks and are back to what's happening in the early church later in the year of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

I'll do a run through on the text first, before going on to the question of miracles.

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Many of the miracles were performed in Solomon's Colonnade, the covered porch or cloister that ran along the eastern wall of the temple court, the place where Peter had preached the sermon in chapter 3 after healing the lame man. It had become a meeting place of the believers so sick people knew that they could find the apostles there.

¹³ No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. Verse 13 is somewhat ambiguous. Who didn't dare join them? Were they Christians or non-Christians? Some may have been afraid of the power the apostles had – leading to the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira – or they may have been afraid of the temple authorities. Just as Jesus gained the respect of the people for his wisdom as well as his signs and wonders, so the apostles received that same respect and high regard from the people. Many overcame their fear and joined the believers.

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Whether or not Peter's shadow was enough to heal as he walked from the temple to wherever he was living, the hope was there among the carers of the sick to bring them out to the apostles. No one doubted the remarkable power the apostles and especially Peter had. Even for sceptical people today, seeing is believing, and the people knew that it was God himself who was at work through these men.

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Just as when Jesus walked across Israel, the word spread and people outside of Jerusalem brought in their sick friends and relatives. Today we don't hear much about those tormented by demons or impure spirits as we think we have scientific explanations for what we now call mental illness. Science doesn't recognise the supernatural because it's not natural, nor the spirit world. If you refuse to accept the existence of the supernatural and God outside time and space, then until a demon personally torments you, it is outside your experience and existence. It is not mental illness like depression, traumatic stress or over-anxiety etc. Luke records "all of them were healed" which is one of those throwaway phrases that is often overlooked.

Now to the subject of my talk: Miracles

We've seen throughout the Gospel of Mark how Jesus performed miracles – healed the sick, fed thousands from five loaves and two fishes, cast out demons, raised the dead, enabled the blind to see and the lame to walk. The apostles were doing the same things now. Just as crowds were drawn to Jesus by the miracles rather than the message, the crowds saw with their own eyes what was impossible in normal circumstances. These signs and wonders needed an explanation.

There are many today who dismiss the Bible as myth and made up because it is hard to believe things outside one's own experience. The Age of Reason began in the late seventeenth century and continues, after a fashion, today. Science explains what normally happens in nature, and doesn't explain the abnormal supernatural. Human activities, thoughts, and history are explained using logic and reason. However, there is much still unexplainable and no one claims that there is no explanation: rather they claim someone will discover it in the future – a known unknown! A rational person will look at history and see that uncommon events do occur – like large meteorites hitting the earth. Based on the number of occurrences of rare events, scientists will estimate the chances of them recurring as very remote in the case of large meteorites and pretty common the case of small ones. The miracles in the Bible occur mainly in three short time periods, if you exclude creation itself. They are rare events. Firstly, Moses revealing God's power to the Egyptians and Israelites and God leading the people as they settled in Canaan; secondly the prophets Elijah and Elisha revealing God's power as the Israelites were turning away from God; and thirdly the ministry of Jesus and the apostles revealing God's love and willingness to allow all who believe to overcome sin and death.

The miracles all demonstrate the power of God at work in a supernatural way. The existence of the supernatural cannot be dismissed merely because its existence is improbable in the eyes of those unwilling to accept its existence because it cannot be measured or observed in ways they have decided are the only means of observation. Much as scientists would like to believe that our minds are simply chemical and electrical reactions in our brains, stimulated by our environment, the reality remains that they don't know how the human mind works with its inbuilt conscience and awareness of itself and others. Describing something is what science is good at, rather than knowing the why things are the way they are. The Christian claim is that miracles are extraordinary and come about because of the Creator God who made the world and all in it by the word of his power. The Christian claim is that God has revealed his will to mankind, and used men who had authority from him to speak on his behalf, and that these men had the power to perform miracles that no one else could do. The Christian claim is that God actually entered the world to save the world and given that God can do anything, the miracles, signs and wonders are not unusual. God on earth in the form of Jesus died and came back to life three days later was an event observed by over 300 witnesses, most of whom were alive when the apostles were daily in the temple speaking about Jesus. People in Jerusalem knew what was being preached was true and factual.

A little bit of thought will reveal that miracles are not the real issue at all. We have no difficulty understanding why people in our time, educated in the way they have been, find it difficult to believe the Christian message. We proclaim that Jesus was born of a virgin mother and they think, quite naturally, that such a thing is impossible. We proclaim that it was the death of Jesus on the cross that secured reconciliation with God and entrance into eternal life. And they simply cannot fathom how the death of an amateur Jewish rabbi 2,000 years ago could possibly be so important to them today. We proclaim that after his death on the cross, Jesus rose from the dead to unending and transcendent human life, was seen alive by many, proving that he had conquered death, not

only for himself for us all who trust in him. And many modern people find that simply impossible to believe. Death is final, they think, and resurrections simply do not happen.

But those problems are not the real problems at all. These things aren't the real issue that really baffles people. The great miracle that Christians proclaim and upon which they rest their confidence of salvation and eternal life is not that Jesus walked on the water or fed 5,000 men with a few scraps of food, or healed lepers or gave sight to the blind. Those are not the great mystery and challenge of our Christian faith. *The really staggering claim we make is something else entirely:* that Jesus of Nazareth was God made man, that God the Son, the second person of the triune God, the living God, the God who made heaven and earth and everything and everyone in it, *that* God became a man, that he took on humanity without the loss of his deity, and that Jesus was as fully divine as he was human. *That is the issue!*

And surely it is obvious that if *that* is what happened, if that mighty miracle occurred – as the Bible says it did; as the faithful men and women who were witnesses of Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection said it did – then such miracles as are reported in this afternoon's four verses are hardly a problem. If this is *who* Jesus is and this is *what* he is – God and man in one person, the only such person who is or who could ever be – then the fact that he performed miracles is not only not a difficulty, it becomes something quite likely and easy to imagine. The maker of heaven and earth can certainly multiply food. The maker of water can walk on it if he wishes to. The maker of the eye can fix it if it is broken. The maker of skin can purify it if it is corrupted by some disease. And the maker of spirits, including evil spirits, can order them to do whatever he wishes.

If you consider the biblical miracles by themselves, in isolation from the central facts of biblical revelation – the creation, the incarnation, and the love of God for his rebellious creatures – of course they will prove a stumbling block. But if you accept the existence of a personal God, if you accept that God, being perfect love and perfect justice, might very well have thought to save the world in just the way the Bible says he did, then miracles are not an impediment to faith, they are further evidence for it, for the divine authority of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As a preacher called Dr. Packer put it beautifully:

“If Jesus had been no more than a very remarkable man, godly man, the difficulties in believing what the New Testament tells us about his life and work would be truly mountainous. But if Jesus was the same person as the eternal Word, the Father's agent in creation, 'through whom also he made the worlds' ...it is no wonder if fresh acts of creative power marked his coming into this world, and his life in it, and his exit from it. It is not strange that he, the Author of life, should rise from the dead. If he was truly God the Son, it is much more startling that he should die than that he should rise again.”

Once we grant that Jesus was divine, it becomes unreasonable to find difficulty in any of this: it is all of a piece and hangs together completely. The Incarnation is in itself an unfathomable mystery, but it makes sense of everything else that the New Testament contains.

And I have still said nothing about the unique quality of the testimony to the miraculous in the Bible. Nothing like the legends and myths of the ancient world, the biblical accounts of the miraculous are sober, serious, chaste, – obviously not written for anyone's entertainment -, and bear faithful witness to the mixture of confusion, fear, and wonder that the miracles provoked in the minds of the people who witnessed them. What is absolutely certain, a point often admitted by the Bible's critics and as often unexplained by them, *the writers of the Bible's accounts of the miraculous obviously themselves thought that these stupendous works of divine power had actually occurred, that what they were writing was not fantasy but history.*

In other words, the reason people stumble over the Bible's narrative of miracles – signs, wonders, works of supernatural power – is not because those accounts are unbelievable but because they have not yet encountered Jesus Christ as God become man for our salvation. When that occurs, all the doubts about miracles disappear as the morning mist!

So, carry yourself back to those wonderful days in Solomon's colonnade. Imagine yourself a visitor to the temple who happened to be there when Peter put his hand on some leper and the man's skin become suddenly healthy, no longer white and scaly, but looking like skin ought to look like, or when he commanded a demon to leave a man or woman only to witness the shriek when the demon did and see in a moment the person restored to a sound mind and body.

Imagine how astonished you would be, such power on display, such happiness all around, such shouts and tears of joy from those who were sick and from their loved ones. But imagine the questions that would rise in your mind. How was this possible? By what power did such healing take place? What is the explanation for such an extraordinary thing, something I've never seen before? This demands an explanation!

And then you would hear Peter talk about Jesus Christ who died for our sins and rose again to give us eternal life. You would hear him or one of the other apostles say that the power by which these poor people were healed was not theirs, but Christ's, now present by his Holy Spirit. Would you not consider that carefully, having seen what you saw, heard what you heard? And would you not believe? Would you not think, I must come to know this Jesus Christ myself? Would you not think, I want such power and such goodness to be wielded on my behalf and on behalf of my loved ones? Wouldn't you immediately realize that the healing was not the main thing? The revelation of the power and the love and the goodness and the divine authority of Jesus Christ: *that is the main thing!*

The history of man's redemption from sin and death *is* the history of the *supernatural*, of events utterly unlike those encountered otherwise in the experience of life. It is no wonder that our faith again and again has stood or has fallen according to the strength of the church's conviction that the biblical account of the miraculous is not only credible but persuasive. And it is and always has been precisely that: credible and persuasive.