

Two Miracles, One Message

The author Arthur C Clark – of 2001 A Space Odyssey fame – once said that sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. So primitive people, goes the supposition, will think that advanced technology is supernatural.

But the other side of that logic is that if something seems magical on the face of it, it's just that we don't understand it well enough. We should be able to understand everything if we simply analyse it thoroughly enough.

That's how modern people often approach Jesus' miracles. Come up with some non-supernatural explanation for the miracles. Maybe the jars had been used to store wine before, and the flavour leached out into the water? Or maybe the crowd remembered the food they'd had in their pockets all along. And so on.

People try to explain them – or even explain them away. But such explanations are difficult.

There are no rules to Jesus miracles. Sometimes Jesus speaks words – but often not. Sometimes Jesus touches someone - sometimes not. Sometimes Jesus does particular actions (like making mud from spit and dirt and putting it on a blind man's eyes) – but usually not.

Miracles, as we read about them in the scriptures are supernatural events, where the natural order of things is overridden – and the modern world doesn't do very well with things that are supernatural.

We live in an enlightened age. An age of science and of evidence-based knowledge. We know that men don't walk on water, blindness can't be cured by an application of spit and dirt to the eyes, water doesn't turn into wine, five thousand men plus women and children cannot be fed from five loaves and two fishes.

In recent times, people use 'miracle' to describe the unusual or the unexpected. The win of one sporting team over another, the finding of a person lost in the bush. The only miracles with a supernatural element we tend to hear about are the faith healings and are often the stuff of American television evangelists...

And yet, the scriptures contain accounts of all sorts of supernatural happenings. Accounts that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all present miracles as actual events ... and yet, they're so often a little uncomfortable for Christians to contemplate, and we have a tendency to downplay them. Supernatural events do not fit into the worldview of most people in the world today. So when we're talking about Jesus to non-Christians – or indeed to other Christians – we tend not to talk about him as someone who could calm storms, who could turn water into wine, who could cast out demons or raise the dead - or curse a fig tree.

When we look at the gospels, miracles make up a large part of the narrative. There's Jesus' teaching, and there's miracles. In John's gospel, the miracles are referred to as signs which bear witness to who Jesus is.

When Jesus says "The Kingdom of Heaven is like this", we can be sure that he knows, because the miracles demonstrate that Jesus is from God – remember Nicodemus' words

from John 3 - "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." (John 3:2).

The miracles are important to us coming to understanding of the gospels, and they are also important to understanding not only Jesus as the Son of God, but also for God's plan for the world. We tend to think of miracles as the suspension of the natural order – that a disease is cured, or a storm calmed, or that thousands are fed, or that the dead are raised to life. But try thinking of them like this: that Jesus meant them to be the restoration of the natural order to the way God intended things to be, and as a foretaste of what things will be like when the world is restored to God.

The miracles show us that in a perfect world – indeed in the perfect world which is to come – there won't be storms. There won't be disease. There won't be hunger. And, most of all, there won't be death.

The second part of today's reading from Matthew's gospel confronts us with not one, but two miracles. And very strangely, one seems to interrupt the other. A synagogue leader whose daughter who's daughter had died goes to Jesus confident that Jesus has the power to bring her back to life. We often jump to thinking that the Jewish leaders were opposed to Jesus – but this synagogue leader certainly puts his faith in Jesus.

So Jesus and his disciples set off for the synagogue leader's house, but on the way there, he is interrupted when a woman effectively 'takes' a miracle from Jesus.

The structure of the gospels tends to be a series of self-contained stories. With each story including a piece of teaching or a miracle, but here we have the accounts of two miracles intertwined. And not just in Matthew's gospel, but also in very similar forms in Mark (5:21-43) and Luke (8:40-55).

But if we just quickly flick back through Matthew's gospel, we get an idea of where these intertwined stories occur in Jesus ministry. Back in chapters three and four, he appeared in the wilderness and was baptised by John, was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, then began his ministry and called his first disciples. Jesus healed the sick and the demon possessed.

Chapters five through seven are the sermon on the mount, and then in chapter eight Jesus healed a man with leprosy, the centurion's paralyzed daughter, Peter's mother-in-law and many others, as well as casting out demons. And he showed his power by calming a storm on the lake.

But he also delivered some harsh teaching for his followers – in response to a disciple wanting to follow Jesus, but telling him he needed to bury his father first, Jesus said, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

We sometimes think of Jesus as a serene figure who passes through the gospels in an almost otherworldly way. But the reality was that he was in the midst of first century Judean life – with all its disease and suffering, and also with all its hustle and bustle. Jesus was healing people who were sick, he was helping those possessed by demons. It was really dramatic stuff. He was often surrounded by crowds, crowds who wanted to hear from him – but also

crowds who wanted him to do specific things. He was often under pressure, and several times we read of Jesus withdrawing from the crowds to pray.

And amongst the crowd on this particular day was a woman who was suffering, who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years.

It was horrible for her. Even beyond whatever pain the bleeding caused, whatever weakness resulted, and whatever suffering the doctors had inflicted trying to heal her, there were the implications of this constant bleeding on her life.

Now, Leviticus 15 doesn't come up often in church life, and I don't think it's an assigned lectionary reading, but it does spell out what the consequences of this woman's condition would have been - she will be unclean as long as she is bleeding... Any bed she lies on ... will be unclean, ... and anything she sits on will be unclean... (Leviticus 15:24-26)

This woman, because of her illness, is unclean. And anything she touches is made unclean. And anyone she touches is made unclean. And anyone who touches anything she touches is unclean too.

And this had gone on for twelve years. She was desperate.

And she thought "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed". She was scared – she didn't kneel down in front of Jesus like the synagogue leader did, instead she came up behind him, likely pushing her way through the crowd and reaching out to touch Jesus' cloak. She had hope that Jesus could help her – but it was quite a superstitious hope: "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed".

And so she reached out, and touched his cloak.

Jesus realised what had happened, and turned around – and don't forget he was on his way to synagogue leader's daughter – and spoke to this woman: "Take heart, daughter," he said, "your faith has healed you."

Jesus addresses her with kindness – he calls her "daughter". Then he puts aside her superstition – it wasn't her touching the cloak that healed her – instead he tells her "faith has healed you."

It was her faith – her belief in Jesus, her trust in Jesus – that healed her. Not some magical healing from simply touching Jesus' robes.

Finally, though, Jesus after this encounter with the woman, he gets to the synagogue leader's house, where the mourning over the dead girl is in full swing, the noisy crowd wailing and crying – and people playing pipes.

He sends the mourners away, saying "Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep" And the mourners laugh at Jesus' suggestion. They've been with the girl, they know how ill she was; they know she died. Her really being only asleep is not a mistake they're likely to have made. So of course they laughed at him.

But he got rid of all those people – he sent them out (5:40) – and he took the girl by the hand and she got up.

And just like the healing of the woman, Jesus puts away superstition. He doesn't want crowds of witnesses, he doesn't particularly want to be known as a healer. But he wants to put things right – when people come to him with a need, he responds.

Just like the woman's healing came as a result of her faith, her belief in Jesus, so the resurrection of the girl came as a result of the synagogue leader's belief, his faith in Jesus.

The account that Matthew gives us of both these miracles points to the power of Jesus, but even more importantly to the power of faith in Jesus. "Your faith has healed you".

In both these miracles we see a complete reversal of what would be expected. A woman who was bleeding was unclean and anything – or anyone – she touched would also be made unclean. But when the woman reached out and touched the edge of Jesus' cloak, instead of her uncleanness tainting Jesus, it was Jesus' cleanliness – his power – that flowed to the woman.

And dead bodies, of course, were also considered unclean – Numbers 19 tells us that "Whoever touches the dead body of anyone will be unclean for seven days." (Numbers 19:11). But Jesus takes the hand of the girl – which should by rights have made him unclean, but instead it was Jesus' cleanliness – his power, his life – that flowed to the girl.

So where does that leave us? We live in an age where it seems we don't witness miracles... that's not to say they don't happen, but if they do they are rare and far between. Back when Jesus was undertaking his ministry and walking the road to Calvary, miracles were signs of Jesus power – pointers to the kingdom of heaven, pointers to who Jesus was.

But we need to remember that at the time of Jesus miracles, people hadn't yet received the gift of the Holy Spirit - and at the time of the miracles we read of in Acts, the Holy Spirit was still spreading out across the world as the gospel was being preached.

Before the Holy Spirit, miracles were the signs that pointed to Jesus as the Son of God. Remember Jesus speaking to Thomas after showing him his wounded hands and side - proving to Thomas the truth of Jesus resurrection? Jesus said to Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed".

Those who have not seen and believed are blessed, not because their belief is better than Thomas', but because their belief comes from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

That's how we come to know and accept all that God has done for us in Jesus today - not from witnessing miracles or seeing evidence of the resurrection, but because of the action of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

Christians today sometimes miss this point. We may not be trying to win followers for Christ through the evidence of miracles, but we can easily become preoccupied with relying on other evidence: People think that if they can *just* find archaeological evidence of Noah's ark, or the tower of Babel or Sodom or Gomorrah, that people will be convinced of the truth,

or if they can just somehow prove a seven day creation or disprove the theory of evolution, then people will come to Christ.

If we can just do this. Or just do that. Or just do the other thing. If we can just touch the edge of Jesus' cloak then we will be made well.

But it wasn't about touching the edge of his cloak for the woman, was it? Jesus said plainly it was her faith that made her well. There were no magical properties to Jesus' robe. It was simply the woman's faith - in Jesus - that made the difference.

And so it is with us.

When we are like the woman and are worn down and worn out by the world or when we feel we are "unclean" or unworthy, we need to not be seeking magical cures or worldly solutions, but we need to be putting our faith in Jesus. Our faith. Our belief and our hope.

And when we are like the synagogue leader: When things are beyond our control. When things are desperate, or when things turn hopeless. Then we can trust Jesus to be with us even through the darkest times of our lives.

Don't fear: Have belief in Jesus. Have hope in Jesus. Have faith in Jesus.

Amen