

A formula for miracles? - Mark 5:21-43

I've reflected before that the modern church has - at times - a strange relationship with miracles. Miracles 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. 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.

And yet, the scriptures contain accounts of these things and more. Accounts that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all present as events which occurred... and yet, they're so often a little uncomfortable for Christians to contemplate.

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

The miracles are important to coming to an 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. People often think of miracles as something like a magic trick – water turning to wine, or the loaves and fishes being produced like the magician's endless handkerchief. #But try thinking of them like this: 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.

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.

Today's reading from Mark, confronts us with not one, but two miracles, and how they come about is quite different. Jesus is called to the Jairus' house to heal his daughter, but on the way there is interrupted when a woman effectively 'takes' a miracle from Jesus.

In the first four and a bit chapters of Mark's gospel, we see Jesus appear, his ministry begin and grow phenomenally, we read of his teaching and his performing miracles. We learn of the crowds that follow him and those that begin to plot against him. It is an amazing time. And there is an immense pressure on Jesus – and several times we read of Jesus withdrawing from the crowds to pray.

It's with that background that we come to today's gospel reading: we heard that the crowd was waiting for him (5:21) and it pressed around him (5:24)

One of the synagogue rulers, someone who was rich and powerful, pushed his way through the crowd. He went down on his knees in front of Jesus and pleaded for Jesus' help.

Amongst the crowd, Jesus heard the pleading of Jairus "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live". Jesus heard. And Jesus responded. And Jesus went with Jairus.

And so did the crowd.

And amongst that crowd was a woman who was suffering, who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. We heard that she'd suffered under the care of doctors and had spent all she had trying to get better.

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. It made her ritually unclean, and it made anything and anyone she touches unclean too (Leviticus 15:19-22, 25-26).

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

And she thought “If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed”. She was scared – she didn’t throw herself down in front of Jesus like Jairus did: instead she came up behind him, 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 just touch his clothes, I will be healed”.

And so she reached out, and touched his cloak – and verse 29 tells us that “Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering”.

Apparently just from touching the edge of Jesus’s cloak.

Jesus realised what had happened and stopped – and don’t forget he was on his way to save Jairus’ daughter – but he turned around and asked her had touched his clothes (5:30).

And then the woman fell at his feet and told him the whole truth – and she was trembling with fear.

Jesus addresses her with kindness – he calls her “daughter”. Then he puts aside her superstition – and probably the superstition of much of the crowd as well – it wasn’t her touching the cloak that healed her – instead he tells her “Your 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. So there we have it, faith is key to the miracle.

Jesus sends her off, “go in peace, and be freed from your suffering”. (5:34)

But even while Jesus was still talking to the woman, word came from Jairus’ house that his daughter had died. The men who brought him that devastating news also callously added “so why bother the teacher anymore?”

Everyone knew Jesus was a healer... but he healed the living.

But Jesus ignored the news. Ignored the hopelessness of Jairus’ situation, and told the synagogue ruler “Don’t be afraid; just believe”. (5:36)

Finally, though, Jesus gets away from the crowd – and takes only his closest companions, Peter, James and John to Jairus’ house, where the mourning is in full swing, with wailing and crying.

Jesus asks what the commotion is about, and tells them that the child is not dead, but merely sleeping.

And the people there, quite naturally, laugh at the 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.

But he got rid of all those people – he sent them out (5:40) – and he took Jairus and Jairus’ wife along with Peter, James and John to the room where the girl was. Jesus took the girl by the hand

and said “Talitha Koum” – “Little girl, get up”, and she got up. In this miracle, it seems to be the words that are important.

But the words “Talitha Koum” are not magic words, any more than Jesus’ cloak was a magic garment. Jesus simply said “Little girl, get up”.

The account that Mark gives us of both these miracles points to the power of Jesus, but even more importantly to the power of faith in Jesus. To Jairus “Just believe”. To the woman “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 hem of Jesus’ cloak, instead of her uncleanliness 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.

Here we have two miracles that seem to depend on faith – the woman’s faith and Jairus’ faith. And they both involve touching... but they’re quite different. Jesus, it seems, has no idea about the woman until she touches his robe, he doesn’t, consciously, heal her – her healing happens because of who he is, not what he does. By contrast, Jesus consciously reaches out and touches Jairus’ daughter.

And while both these miracles have the elements of faith and touch, not all of Jesus’ miracles do.

Water into wine in John chapter 2? Well, you could perhaps argue that Mary’s faith was involved, but there was no touching.

The healing at Bethesda in John Chapter 5? No faith. No touching.

The feeding of five thousand plus women and children in John 6? No faith, but Jesus did touch the loaves and fish.

The calming of the storm which we looked at last week (Mark 4:35-41)? Perhaps faith, but no touching.

The healing of the deaf and mute man in Mark 7? There was perhaps faith from the people, and there was certainly touching – touching the man’s ears and tongue – and words again, this time “Ephphatha! Be opened”.

And the blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8)? This time he spat on the man’s eyes. But blind Bartimaeus in chapter received his sight with no touching at all.

What do we make of this mess of faith and words and actions? In our enlightened age we might well ask what the formula for a miracle is.

These accounts of miracles are about 2,000 years old, and 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. You probably remember the account of the risen Jesus speaking to Thomas after showing him his wounded hands and side - proving to Thomas the truth of Jesus resurrection. Jesus says 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. Friends, 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 hard 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 hem of Jesus' cloak then we will be made well.

But it wasn't about touching the hem of his cloak for the woman, was it? And it wasn't the magic words ‘Talitha Koum’?

And it wasn't Jesus' spit. Or the mud he made. Or his touch. And the people healed didn't always have faith.

There is a formula for miracles. And the formula is a person. The one thing that all the gospel accounts of miracles have in common, is Jesus.

We heard in our reading from Acts 3 the story of Peter and John going to the temple, where they encountered a crippled man who asked them for money (you probably know the Sunday School song), but Peter said to him “Silver and gold I do not have, but what I have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk”. And he did.

It was a miracle. No touch. No faith from the man that we know of. No special words. But there is Jesus.

And Jesus is there for us, too.

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 Jairus. When things are out of our control. When things are desperate, or when things seem hopeless. Then we need to put our faith in him and listen to his words again: "Don't be afraid. Just believe."

Amen