

Bennochy church: 22nd January 2017

I wonder if we miss the miracle in the ordinary. Those moments of life where something grabs your attention, takes your breath away. No law of nature is broken, but there is something in that life event that we set apart from the every day, and we call it miraculous. I hope you would agree that life itself is a miracle. We live within the laws of nature, yet, think about how our bodies function, evolve and adapt. Is that not miraculous?

One of the difficulties of defining the miraculous, is that as our knowledge increases, so what was once understood as a miracle, now has an explanation. We know how it works. But even if we now have a greater understanding of say, biology, does that make life any less miraculous? I don't think so. What is the essence of life that makes us who we are, and unique individuals? What I am trying to say, is knowledge and miracle are not mutually exclusive, and, God is most often seen and understood in the ordinary, rather than the extraordinary. If we are looking for God, let's look for God in the miracle of the ordinary. For the ordinary, is where we live our lives.

The writers of scripture had a different understanding. They understood miracles as the actions of God that clearly broke the laws of nature. There is no logic that can be applied for example to jars of oil that kept replenishing themselves. It is a story from the life of Elisha the prophet, either to be believed at

face value, or, a story with a point to be made, probably in this case, saying more about the position of Elisha as a prophet, than anything about God.

The miracle in this case does not go beyond supplying the physical needs of the family. However, the man with an evil spirit, is a story that has at its heart, not a miracle of healing in itself, but an encounter between that spirit and Jesus. It is ultimately a story about the power of God.

We might come to these kind of passages with a sense of scepticism, but let not our 21st century minds get in the way of what is actually going on here, and why Mark has recorded it the way he has. *William Neil in his one volume bible commentary p. 359 says this, "In the gospels, physical disease and insanity are regarded as the work of demons, evil spirits who are subject to Satan, whose kingdom is in constant opposition to the Kingdom of God. Jesus accepts this view-point as a child of his times. A first century Jew with twentieth century medical or psychiatric knowledge, would be as unreal as a first century Jew with a knowledge of space-travel, nuclear fission or even the geography of this planet. Humanly speaking, and that is how we must speak of Jesus, the Incarnation means that God became man, at a particular time and in a particular place. The scientific, geographical and historical knowledge of Jesus was therefore that of his own day, just as the fact that he was fully*

human meant that he was at times hungry, tired and despondent. Where Jesus differed from his contemporaries—and from us—was in his knowledge of God, of the purpose of life, and of the hearts of men, not in his possession of the kind of factual knowledge which is in the last resort of secondary importance. The basic fact for us in this, as in all the healing stories of the gospel, is that Jesus healed suffering folk. Clearly he did not regard it as the will of God that anyone should have a diseased mind or a diseased body. Pain, like death, is an intrusion and an accident, not part of the fabric of the Kingdom of God. In this story he exercises the “unclean spirit”, in the story of Peter’s sick mother-in-law his touch makes her well. He expresses the understanding of Jesus and the context of the miracle, far better than I could ever do!

If we dig a bit deeper, there is something in this story about wholeness. Jesus impresses with his teaching. The phrase is, “*he taught with authority.*” It is the authority of the healing that spreads the word of Jesus throughout the region. He taught with such authority that things happened. In the very next breath, and note we are still in the synagogue, Jesus commands an evil spirit to depart. The people are amazed. Heart and soul are brought together. Jesus offers wholeness. I think that would have made sense to a 1st century Palestinian. Our tendency is to separate spirit and soul from body and see healing only in relation to the physical.

But what is going here? What are the purpose of such miracles? One thing we can say is this, and it is an interesting thought; miracles led to wonder, but not actual belief in God, and as such, I suspect, were used sparingly. I believe God speaks through the special moments of the ordinary. So if we always look for the miraculous that defies the laws of nature, we are going to miss God. We will be looking in the wrong place. Many who witnessed the miracles of Jesus, as recorded in scripture, they were amazed, but failed to recognise who he was. We need to be able to see Jesus, for who he is, beyond the wonder of the miraculous.

We will never stand in the shoes of Thomas, whose faith was only as strong as being able to physically touch the wounds of Christ. For us, God comes through the ordinary revelations of faith. To see in the ordinary, the wonders of God. To hear in the ordinary, the voice of Christ. To feel in the ordinary, the touch of the Spirit of God. Amen.