

Pentecost 10  
13/8/2017

Mark the Evangelist

1 Kings 19:9-18  
Psalm 85  
Matthew 14:22-33

### The one miracle

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We hear of Jesus walking on the water and the temptation is strong to ask the question, Did it really happen? To this question the response of the Scriptures is, in no small part, Who cares? Who cares whether Jesus could walk on water? Who cares whether he fed 5000 people with a few loaves and fish? Who cares whether he was raised from the dead?

Now, we can understand the “Who cares?” question coming from the sceptic but could the *Scriptures* be so impious as to answer in this way? Or, perhaps more to the point, should the *preacher* be so impious as to suggest this? Just between you and me, your preacher is capable of great impiety – although he thinks that this is probably not an instance.

How could that be so? The problem with the “Did it really happen?” question is that it is a *closed* question. We might *imagine* that we are asking it openly, as a scientist might ask about how an apple falls or an acid bites, but the point is that the scientist’s questions are also closed, however earnest she is *as a scientist*. Such questions are closed not in terms of their sincerity but because there is no deep human meaning attached to the answers. The answers might describe *how* to move the world but *in themselves* will not move it; we need to *want* to move it, and in this is the “meaning” of such answers.

In a similar way, if we could prove a “Yes” answer to the “Did it really happen?” question on any of the miracles of the Scriptures, the *Scriptures* would ask of us again, So what? What are you going to do with that? What do these 2000 year old stunts have to do with you today? This, of course, is a question often unthinkingly tossed at the Scriptures but the Scriptures toss it right back: what could a Yes *mean*? The meaning of a Yes is much less clear than we usually imagine.

There *are* miracle stories in the gospel accounts, of course, but they are largely *distractions* to us in a way not unlike the distractions of the parables. We’ve seen in the last few weeks that Jesus said he used parables because in them, “seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand” (cf. Matthew 13.13-15). The same could be said of the gospel’s use of the miracles. We often imagine that it is quite clear what we are to see in these stories. We might even imagine that, were we ever convinced that we actually witnessed a miracle, we would know what it meant. This is the assumption in the mocking request for a miracle, both in the Scriptures and today. Yet, to recall again last week’s suggestion that the miracles are parables and the parables are miracles, the miracles also have a “seeing, they do not perceive” quality. We think we know what they would be all about if they actually happened, but we are easily mistaken.

How might such a dynamic be in play in this morning’s text? What is there to be seen apart from the spectacle of a person who walks on water in precisely the way that everyone else doesn’t?

We hear that the disciples see Jesus coming to them on the water but fear that it is a ghost. The *fear* is important. They are not *amazed* that they see Jesus on the water but imagine something more sinister. Jesus responds to the anxiety. He asks not, “*Didn’t you know* that I could even walk on water?”, but declares, “Do not fear, it is I”.

Peter’s response arises out of the disciples’ anxiety. We hear not “that’s amazing” in response to the miracle but the surprising, “If it is you Lord, command me to come onto the water with you.” Notice what Peter’s response is *not*: it is not, “If you, Jesus, can walk on water, then make it such that I can as well. Peter does not say, “*Let* me walk on the water too”. We hear, rather: “*If it is you, command* me to come to you.” Peter tests the “ghost” not by wanting to walk on the water himself, but by seeing whether it can *command* him to walk on the water. The implication is, “I will know that it is you, Jesus, if you command me to come to you.”

This, surely, is an odd proposal to our ears. Anyone could simply utter a crazy command like this, not least a tempting siren in the waters on a wild night. But here is the faith of Peter – and of the church – at its very best: the confidence that *Jesus makes possible what he commands*. It is for this that Peter listens, and looks.

Jesus gives the command; Peter walks. But this is not Jesus performing a “nature miracle” and so demonstrating himself to have the divine power of the creator. The thing which is established is that the ghost is Jesus. How do I know that it is him? Because he made possible what he commanded; *this* is the proof of his divinity. *This* is the work of Jesus, of God; in this are they “miraculous” – that they effect what they command: “let there be light” (and there is); “be clean” (and we are).

If Jesus did actually pull a stunt like this, now – *in the text as Scripture* – it is something else: something deeper and richer, something which relegates our typical concern with mere miracles to “Who Cares?” Our story this morning declares, What God commands, God gives.

So far as sheer miracles go, if there is a reason we don’t do a lot of walking on water these days it is simply that God doesn’t command such silliness. Instead of wondering why we don’t see such miracles today, we might wonder what it is that God *does* command of us, how it might be that God might provide what he commands, and what our “posture” as disciples is to be between that divine command and divine fulfilment. So let’s turn to that.

Our lives are filled with commands – to do, to be, to have, to desire, to give, to live – and those people or situations which make these demands of us rarely contribute to their fulfilment. *We* are made responsible for ourselves, for our standing before each other and so for our standing before God. In this, life becomes a matter of anxiety – whether it is manifest on the surface of our lives, or is deeply hidden behind the protective measures we’ve constructed around ourselves. Do these things and, so, save yourselves.

Now, the point here is not that *God* must have commanded these things and, so, God will give them. It is the other way around: if what is commanded is not given by the one who commands it, that one is not God. There is certainly *something* which commands of us that we be relaxed and comfortable, educated, healthy, live in a certain suburb, drive a certain car, speak with a certain accent and style, live a long life, be beautiful according to local expectation. *Something* commands these things but it is not God. In such things we are left alone to succeed or fail, to attain “life” as we imagine it, or to sink below the waves as we perceive them.

There is certainly something which commands that our data be backed up, our opinions be surveyed, our insurance premiums paid, our budgets be balanced, our accommodations be of a certain type, that the sound system work and that the children be quiet... but it is not God. These commands and the anxieties they create come from elsewhere, however much we might be pleased to hear them.

Any such penultimate things might be used by God, but they could also be different from what we imagine or desire and *still* be used by God. God does not command that we and our things be useful but simply *makes* them so. This is the meaning of creation out of nothing and salvation by grace alone.

What *does* God command? *Come*. This command is delivered to us *as we are* and not as we ought to be. There is no moral or spiritual limbo through which we have to pass in order to be able to respond, nothing which has to be gotten straight before we move. Jesus says, *Come*. "So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus". As simple as that, if God makes possible what God commands.

There is only one miracle at the heart of Christian confession: a God who gives what he commands and whose one command is that we be his. God says to us, Come to me, be my children. And it is done in our hearing and stepping out. *Faith* is holding that God commands that we not be lost, and keeps us safe in that command. That being done, we are then free to do with all the other lesser demands of us as we wish. *Doubt* is holding that everything which really matters is up to us, and sinking under the weight of it all into that which cannot support us but swallows us up.

Let us choose faith, with the life and freedom it brings.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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