

Easter 6
26/5/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Revelation 21:10, 22; 22:1-5

Psalm 67

John 14:23-29

I believe in miracles

In a sentence:

Jesus, crucified and risen, is the one miracle in which the church believes

Our Prime Minister believes in miracles. More than that, he has apparently recently witnessed one.

At the same time, critical analysis has felt less need to invoke divinity and has pinpointed clever or even cynical political strategy as the cause of the election 'upset'. If there were anything miraculous about the election result, it looks like God had at least a little help.

It doesn't much matter how serious the PM was in his remark; my interest this morning is that doubtless many *have* sent thanks heavenward for the outcome of the election, even as the political strategy is acknowledged. In the interests of full disclosure, no such thanksgiving has been heard from me, but my point this morning is not narrowly political but broadly theological: what is a miracle? To turn the matter around, would it have been 'miraculous' had the opposition been successful? Probably not, as many thought this to be the most likely scenario and miracles are not usually what we *expect* to happen. Still, many would hold that a Shorten government implementing its proposed policies would at least have been 'good', even excellent. And surely 'and it was good' denotes the miraculous.

To some extent we're just playing with words here but it's in an effort to give substance to the question of miracles, or to what is sometimes characterised as 'divine intervention'. More put helpfully, Where and how is God active in the world? For talk of miracles is talk of the activity of God.

The Bible, of course, is full of miracle stories: an axe head floats, the sun stands still in the sky, and a little boy's lunch feeds a great crowd. But the Bible is not a collection of historical 'facts' from which we deduce a few definitions or patterns in which to believe. What holds the Bible together is not similarities between the stories it contains or even common themes which might be discovered between the covers. What hold the Bible together is very covers themselves. Those covers have been put there by the church – that community which springs from the *pre*-biblical confession that the crucified and risen Jesus is Lord. It is the experience of continuing to engage with this Lord which causes the Bible and our ongoing engagement with it.

This is to say that, so far as miracles are concerned, the *one determining* miracle of the Bible is the resurrection of Jesus. Yet this needs to be qualified immediately because the resurrection *looks* too much like miracles looked 'before' the resurrection of Jesus(!). The resurrection looks to be 'miraculous' *in itself*, as might a dead-in-the-water government being returned to office.

But the resurrection is not like this, is not the most impressive of all the impressive miracles in the Scriptures. The qualification of the miraculous nature of the resurrection needed here is the totally un-miraculous-looking crucifixion, such that we must also say that the one determining miracle of the Bible is the *crucifixion* of Jesus.

There is, of course, apparently nothing miraculous about the crucifixion. It's the 'natural' thing which happens when matters get a little too 'out there' for comfort, rather like what might be expected to happen to an opposition with too many new ideas for a loss-averse community.

Separated into mere history on the one hand and divine intervention on the other, the crucifixion and the resurrection become mere 'seasons', of the type we saw Ecclesiastes – a time for dying, a time for rising, a time for the Right, a time for the Left (Ecclesiastes 3.1-14; see the sermon for April 19). *Elections* are mere seasons. There are no miracles here – at least, nothing which endures – for history allows a time for everything. History buries all political messiahs without hope of (political) resurrection.

When the church *as* church gives thanks for God's miraculous gifts, it is not for anything which comes and goes in the manner of the seasons. The quintessential thanksgiving of the church – found in the Great Prayer of the Eucharist – names the miracles of God as creation, redemption in cross and resurrection, and consummation of all things.

These defining miracles endure through the vagaries of history. And so, in seasons rich and poor, they are named as sources of *peace*, and this brings us finally to the Scripture text for this sermon!

The risen crucified Lord stands before his seasonally troubled disciples, and declares, 'Peace I leave with you; *my* peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.' 'The world' gives now peace, now division; now hope, now despair; now sunshine, now storms; a time for every politics under heaven.

Jesus does not give this way; what he offers here is not 'with' the times but *through* them – for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. The '*my*' peace is crucial here, for the peace of Jesus is not the peace of the risen Jesus only but also the peace of the Jesus with a crucifixion looming in the near future. The miracle in which we are to believe is the peace which was Jesus' own way in the world. His way was as a presence of the kingdom of God in a time and place in which that kingdom was apparently quite absent. The miracle of God is the possibility of peace *in the midst* a world which is apparently hopelessly divided.

This is not an easy miracle in which to believe, because it touches us here and now, in our *own* sense of the absence of God's kingdom. To believe in such a miracle requires that we rise to the command we most desperately want to hear and obey, and yet find most difficult to hear and obey: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid'. This is not a word of 'comfort'; it is no less a command than any other 'do' or 'do not' we read in the Scriptures.

As a command it is hard to hear because to let go of trouble and fear would be to rise to our responsibility to love and serve without reading the seasons as if they were signs of God's power, without despair because of what has or has not happened, and without elation praising God for an accident of history.

Dis-appointment ends when we recognise that our true appointment is to know who is God. To know who is God is to know what the miracle is which is being wrought: that, in life or in death, our mouths will be filled with laughter and our tongues loosed with a joy which will not end with a change of season, or an election, or even death itself. Any laughter or joy which might be ended by such passing things has known no true miracle, no deep good.

The miracle of this God is that, as much despite our efforts as because of them, God works our works to God's own end. This end – in life and death, in wins and losses, in all things 'under the sun' – is a peace which *passes* understanding but *under which* we are to stand: to live and love and serve, testifying that even here the Father and the Son come to make their home with us.

May this peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Jesus his Christ, now and always, Amen.
