

Easter 3
18/4/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 3:1-19
Psalm 4
Luke 24:36b-48

Miraculous

In a sentence

The miracle at the heart of faith is that God makes sense of us for our own understanding, and calls us to renewed life.

The events at the Easter-heart of the Christian story seem to beg to be ‘made sense of’. How can we *comprehend* a resurrection or any purported miracle around Jesus?

Yet, while the desire to make sense is a natural one, we must recognise its limitations. This is not to say that we ought to allow ourselves to be ‘unsensible’ or irrational. It is more a question of what makes sense of what. What will bring us closer to the heart of Christian experience is entertaining the possibility that these biblical texts might ‘make sense’ *of us*, might comprehend us

The story of the man miraculously healed in our Acts reading today is another ‘need to make sense of’ passage in the Easter account, reflecting as it does the ongoing impact of Easter and Pentecost.

While there is a lot of scepticism these days (and, even back then!) about miracles, even those who stand as a matter of principle against any purported miracle retain an interest in the *idea* of miracles. The credulous and the sceptic alike, we all would that someone enter our lives and declare, ‘in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk!’ or ‘be poor no longer’ or ‘be lonely no more’, and not only declaring this, of course, but the miracle then taking place. This is a story we would all *love* to believe for the relief it seems to promise.

However, as we ponder the idea of a miracle, we must be mindful of what the miraculous is *not*: miracles are not *magic*. Magic has to do with the possession of a certain knowledge about the way the world works and, so, possession of knowledge about how things might be *manipulated*. If you know the correct incantation and say it in the right way, then you can bring about what you desire. And so in the Harry Potter stories, for example, the young witches and wizards are gradually inducted into the mysteries of their craft: the words which must be said, and how they must be said. We see them struggle to get their Latin phrases right, and to wave their arms in the right way, in order to make happen whatever the spell is supposed to effect. In this, magic is much closer to modern scientific technique with the potential of its descriptive formulas than it is to biblical miracle.

On a magical understanding, Peter knows the magic word – ‘Jesus Christ’ – and the lame man is healed. (A little later a magician named Simon even offers to pay the apostles if they’ll teach him the ‘magical’ gesture by which the Holy Spirit was imparted to new believers ([Acts 8.9-23]). Yet, neither Peter nor Luke are interested in magic. If there is a tendency towards a magical interpretation of miracle stories like this, it is in *us* and not in the story itself that the magic is found. Such a magical understanding appears in us when we find ourselves thinking that, if only *we* knew the right words to pray, and if we prayed them with an *appropriate* air of authority or with

the right degree of *sincerity*, or with the right amount of *faith*, or if we could find someone else who can do that for us ... if only we *knew* the *spell*, we too could do what Peter did.

Yet, closer attention to the story contradicts this reading. Whereas our interest here is most likely to stem from the possibility (or the *impossibility*) that we too might share in such a *healing*, Peter is interested in communicating the possibility of the *forgiveness of sin*. He makes no implied promise of the healing of our bodies; the healing of the lame man is almost incidental to the point of the passage. Recall here what we said last week about the secondary status of the resurrection of Jesus itself: the resurrection is not the main event but a sign pointing to something else – in fact, a sign that also points to matters of judgement and forgiveness.

Peter declares not, ‘Repent and turn to God so that you may all walk again, or see again, or stand up straight again, or be healed of your sadness’, but ‘Repent ... and turn to God *so that your sins may be wiped out.*’ The big news in the story is not that God acts in the name of Jesus to enable a lame person to walk again, but that God acts in the name of Jesus to forgive sin.

The introduction of the theme of forgiveness here disrupts the magical reading of the miracle. Magical thinking, with its the desire to know how to make this or that happen, is not just about what we might be able to *do* but is also about how we understand *ourselves*. To want to change things magically is to demonstrate that we don’t think of ourselves as part of our problems. Magic doesn’t change *us* in ourselves but changes others or the world: my love potion is given to change you, not me. Magic is a tool in our hands for shaping what is *outside* us.

But Peter’s preaching is directed at a different target. With the charge of sin and offer of forgiveness, Peter opens up the thought that we *ourselves* need to be changed. To be guilty of sin is to have a share in the reason for what is wrong. ‘Sin’, as an idea, gathers *us* into the problem, makes us a part of the problem.

The difficulty of the miracle now shifts. In terms of where we started, the hard text we seek to make sense of now offers us a new sense for ourselves. The crowd respond to the showy miracle, but Peter wants to show them *themselves*.

This is a bigger shift than we might think.

It is as difficult to believe that I might need real change as it is that the lame could walk again in this way. Pressing further, it is as difficult to learn and understand what might need to be done in me as an individual or in us as a community as it is for a dead man to stop being dead.

It is much easier to *make* sense of something – to know it on our own terms – than to *be made* sense of – to know ourselves on another’s terms, especially if that ‘other’ is one whose knowledge of us cannot simply be dismissed.

The death and the resurrection with which Easter faith is concerned is not the lame man’s disability and healing or even the death and resurrection of Jesus himself; it is the death which is *in the people* – the capacity to ‘kill the Author of life’, Peter says (3.15) – and the possibility of their rising from that in repentance (3.19). Jesus dies and rises, that *we* might die and rise too.

To proclaim Jesus as risen is not to believe in magic; it is to declare ourselves to be under judgement. And yet, *miraculously* – *here* is the miracle – to proclaim Jesus risen is also to declare that we are within reach of forgiveness by the sheer grace of the one who brings the charges against us.

We will hear more about these charges next week. But, for now, the point is the need to entertain not the abstract idea of a miracle but the concreteness of the *repentance* to which the miracles point. It is only when we let go of making sense of Easter on our own terms, and let the story speak to us of things we don't yet know, that a *rethinking* – itself a kind of repentance – becomes a real and close possibility. And with that comes the possibility of a life lived with new understanding, vigour and hope.

This life is what the people of God – and all people – deeply desire: hearts once crippled now having cause to run and leap and praise God (3.8).

This life is what the gospel of the risen, crucified one makes possible, by making more profound sense of us than we yet have made on our own terms.

Jesus dies and rises that we might, too.

So let us die, and rise, and walk and leap in love and praise.
