

Psalm 23
John 9:1-41

Eyes to see

For the modern, scientifically-informed mind, a miracle constitutes a very particular problem: the violation of the “natural order”.

Faced with the claim that a miracle has occurred the first response will be that the observation is wrong: what has looked like a miracle was, in fact, not one at all. So, for example, the blindness or lameness which has been healed was in fact the releasing of the person from a psychosomatic condition by means of a clever therapy. Certainly some of the miracles attributed to Jesus have been accounted for in this way, casting him as a gifted therapist (in the modern sense). If no particular explanation can be given for the miracle the alternative is not that, indeed, God has been active. Rather, we will assume that our theories about how the world works are not yet extensive enough to cover all observed phenomena. This is no great crisis, and often the cause of great excitement, as a new set of scientific questions are opened up. We have a way of dealing with the amazing and the (currently) unexplained which simply defers the decision. As polytheistic belief systems simply add another god to the pantheon when some new part of the world needs to be accommodated, we expect to be able to add another chapter to our science if something unexplained happens. An apparent miracle would speak to the modern mind less about God’s power and more about our own ignorance.

My point here is not to argue that miracles do not, or cannot happen. About this I am happily agnostic. The point is that it would almost be a waste of God’s time to bother with miracles these days.

Of course, the people in the gospel reading from John this morning are not modern scientific thinkers, but this does not mean that they were fools. The Pharisees are the lead sceptics in the story, and rightly so. Yet their investigation leads to them being unable to deny that something has happened which has all the feel of a miracle. To them, as would not be necessary for the modern mind, this implies the presence of God in or through the one who has done this.

Yet there is another dimension to their sense of the miracle which we don’t usually feel. While they cannot deny that something extraordinary has happened, it seems that God’s presence has been realised in a way which violates God’s own command. This is the reason for the controversy around Jesus’ having done this on the Sabbath.

We need to forget here that we have heard from Jesus in another gospel tradition that “the Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath.” In John’s account Jesus appeals to no happy humanism to justify what he has done. In fact, he simply does not justify what he has done. Whereas in the other gospels Jesus often engages in arguments and proofs of his point with his opponents, in John’s gospel we don’t hear these arguments so much as simply see the disorienting impact which Jesus has on those who meet him. There is no justification here of his healing on the Sabbath but only the confusion of the Pharisees, echoing Nicodemus’ exclamation from two weeks ago, “How can these things be”? The miracle points to Jesus but the Sabbath points away from him.

Part of the reason we don't feel what the Pharisees feel is that we have heard this story. We know what the Pharisees does not know – that Jesus is the good guy and they are not. In the same way, we know what the woman at the well did not know (whom we met last week), and what Nicodemus did not know (whom we met the week before). They all effectively ask “How can it be?” regarding things which seem easy for us. We know of the wind-like character of the people of the Spirit (which Nicodemus did not), of worship in spirit and truth (which the Samaritan woman did not), and about the Sabbath, which the Pharisees seem not to know. It is given to us who read these stories and have been formed by them to know, to see.

Yet all of this brings us to a consideration of where today's reading ends.

John 9.39 Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' ⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' ⁴¹Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.

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Do we see? Can we know? In a relative sense, this must be the case. We go to a mechanic because he knows cars, to a doctor because she knows bodies, to accountants because they know money. But in the gospel story the knowing and seeing is of the absolute variety: the knowledge of God and so the true knowledge of ourselves. And in this instance the Pharisees' knowledge of God cannot fit Jesus in, because Jesus exercises a freedom which seems to violate God's command. And because of this, nothing of what they know and by which they make judgements about the things of God amounts to anything: your sin remains, Jesus says, God is lost to you.

There's a kind of pessimism to be read from this story: it is as difficult to see the presence of God in the work of Jesus as it is for a man born blind to begin to see.

But the story does revolve around a healing, and the one who is healed is, in fact, healed of two things: That which ailed him alone – his blindness – and that which he and Pharisees suffered in common – not seeing who Jesus was. His eyes begin to work as they should, and he sees the “Son of Man” (9.35-37).

This chapter is only in a passing way about the healing of a man whose eyes did not work. For the thing to be seen here is not what eyes see but the presence of God in Jesus, which the eyes of the Pharisees both see and cannot see.

If there is a kind of pessimism in this story about our ability to see, it is met with the promise that eyes can be opened: that those born and living with what we might hesitatingly call “spiritual” blindness, can be healed even of that most dehumanising of conditions. As our poet said this morning, this possibility seems

*...a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you will purge yourself
Of desire and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.*

(R S Thomas, *The kingdom*)

Such green-as-a-leaf faith is a kind of *innocence* which knows and yet does not, a *humility* which is open to being taught, and so realises a gift of a *freedom* which comes from not having to know all things because God knows us, sees us, and loves *us*.

May all God's people continue to grow in such wisdom and vision, to God's greater glory and our richer humanity.

Amen.
