

John 9:1-42

On the irrelevance of miracles

ForeWord

A thesis to consider: were Jesus among us today as he was among the Judeans in Palestine 2000 years ago, any miracles he might perform now would be pointless. By this, I don't mean that he didn't then or couldn't now perform miracles. I mean that, even if he did, here and now, they would be irrelevant, and irrelevant in the sense we [considered a couple of weeks ago](#): they wouldn't help, wouldn't *relieve*.

For us with our generally modern and scientifically informed minds, the notion of miracle poses a particular problem: the violation of what we now call the "natural order". We've already banished God from the world we inhabit, so that faced with the claim that a miracle has occurred, our response will typically be that the observation is wrong: what looked like a miracle was, in fact, not one at all. There is something we didn't notice or take into account. A dead person raised was not really dead; a blind or lame person healed was simply released from a psychosomatic condition by a clever therapist.

Even if we can't imagine why something has happened, we don't then conclude that, indeed, God has been active. We are more likely to assume that our theories about how the world works are not yet extensive enough to account for what we've seen. There are yet more mysteries to be penetrated, equations to be written. Far from being a crisis which causes us to rethink our banishment of the miraculous God, what we can't explain often causes great excitement, indicating new understandings to be discovered. We deal with the amazing and the unexplained by deferring understanding until more comprehensive theories are developed.

Responses like this suggest that it would be a *waste of God's time* for God to bother with miracles these days because we have built-in means of explaining them away. We are very, very hard to impress. Or perhaps more to the point, we quite simply have no means of even processing the notion of a miracle, because our world is such that God can't disturb it. In this, we imagine that we've outgrown the credulity of those who went before us, who believed that God can and does wilfully disrupt the natural order.

Perhaps we are right about this, we moderns. But this does not mean that we've dealt with the miracle stories, or at least all of them. What we don't entertain is the possibility that if the miracles did "really" occur as described, they wouldn't tell us anything useful.

That a miracle might have happened and be recognised but then *dismissed* by those most likely to believe in miracles seems to be what happens in our Gospel text today. Taken from John's Gospel, the story illustrates John's scepticism regarding miracles: his scepticism that seeing such things is required for believing. Quite the opposite unfolds in the story: although close to incontrovertible proof of a miracle is established, it has no effect on the critical observers.

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(→ Hearing: John 9.1-41)

Word: Proclamation

Of course, the people who feature in this story were not modern scientific thinkers. But neither were they fools. The Pharisees in the story are rightly sceptical of the report of a blind man's sight being rectified. Yet neither can they deny that something miraculous has happened.

Yet, while they cannot deny the extraordinary report, this alleged miraculous work of God – as a “work” – has occurred on the Sabbath, mandated to be work-free. We must 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”. John's Jesus appeals to no happy humanism to justify working on the Sabbath. Jesus gives no justification for his healing on the Sabbath. And so, while the apparent miracle points towards Jesus, its performance on the Sabbath points away from him. This is the tension the Pharisees feel.

The question, then, is not, Did Jesus do this? This is already established. The question is, Does Jesus' having done this prove him righteous or unrighteous? We must feel the jolt here, given how we usually hear accounts of miracles. The modern mind asks questions like “Did it really happen?”, as if an affirmative answer to this would be self-explanatory. But the proposal of this story is quite the opposite: knowing that it happened doesn't tell us anything about what it *means*. The miracle *by itself* is, in this sense, “irrelevant”. This is an instance of what becomes more explicit later in the Gospel, in the well-known story of “doubting Thomas”, where Jesus declares against Thomas' insistence on seeing: “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”. Seeing doesn't tell us what we need to know (or, in a different sense, what we should *really* be seeing).

Put differently, the miracle which matters is not what we could call the “magic trick”. The miracle is the *seeing* which the trick makes possible. The miracle is only the lens, through which we might or might not choose to look. The miracle is not the magic, but that *some* people come to see, even if most do not.

At the end of the story, we hear Jesus say,

³⁹‘I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’

This undercuts just about anything we have learned about what miracles are “for”. Are they not supposed to attract our attention? Impress us? Make us *believe* in Jesus or whoever performs them? Do we not wish that we could perform miracles, so that others would see and come to faith? Yet, Jesus says, “I came into this world...[that] those who do see may become blind”. Eyes which cannot – or refuse – to see, are as much part of what Jesus reveals as the possibility that the closed eyes might be opened.

⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near him heard [him] 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.

The magic trick now falls into the background; it is only the occasion for a deeper reflection, almost a ruse to make a different point. This lesson sits within shifting meanings of sight and sin. The man's blindness represents no sin but rather his *readiness for belief*. His blindness is what he does not yet know, which is the identity of the one who heals him. The appropriately blind here – to say a strange thing – are those who wait to have their eyes opened, which means here, those who wait to know who

Jesus is. Over against these, the sinful are those who do not know that they are blind, and so who refuse to allow that they need healing, and so who cannot recognise Jesus.

The story, then, makes rather a pessimistic point: 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. Though the Pharisees eyes and ears – and perhaps ours too – are physically open to see and hear everything that can be physically seen and heard, they don't see or hear beyond the physical. And so the story is only in a passing way about a rectification of the eyes of a man whose eyes did not work. We should notice here not eyes which now register light but eyes which register the presence of God in Jesus, which the eyes of the Pharisees cannot see in the miracle they cannot deny.

The story began with Jesus saying that the man had been born blind “so that God's works might be revealed in him”. Superficially, this is a deeply troubling declaration, as if God kills in order to raise to life again. But, in view of what we've said about what then unfolds, God doesn't render him blind in order then to heal him. Death is not a method for God. Rather, the man becomes an occasion for making an unsettling point: we would not know what God looked like, even if he were standing right in front of us. This is the pathos of the Pharisees' objections. And so Jesus says to them – and, again, perhaps to us – If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see’, your sin remains. Most strangely, then, if the healed man represents the believer, faith becomes a waiting-to-see, an acknowledgement that we do not yet see.

But if there is a pessimism here 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: seeing with only our own eyes and not as God sees. The not-seeing of faith is the beginning to see as God sees.

The strange thing this story proposes is that the blind man was, *in his blindness*, closer to God than those whose eyes worked properly. Faith is a kind of innocence which knows and yet does not. Faith is a humility which is open to being taught. Faith is a realisation of the gift of freedom which comes from not having to know all things, not having to see all things, not having all things reduced to certainty about what could and couldn't be so.

The miracle is not the trick which breaks the rules and which, against the rules, which we must try to believe. The miracle is that there are no rules. And so the miracle is that we don't need miracles. This is the meaning of creation, of grace.

With a God like this, we are – as we are – miracle enough. The trick is actually believing this.
