

SIGNS OF GOD'S KINGDOM

St Mark's Gospel includes many more miracle accounts than parables. This underlines the reality of God's Kingdom backed up by signs of God's power. The disciples, like any Jew, accepted the possibility of miracles. In ancient times God worked wonders to liberate Israel: the sea dividing, manna from heaven, and so on.

The Gospel presents Jesus as God come to earth to liberate it from sin and death. Jesus' miracles are signs of the Kingdom of God breaking the chains of sin and death. Christians believe that the greatest miracle is the resurrection of Jesus, showing the final victory of the true Messiah.



What is a miracle?

'Miracle' can mean:

1. an incredible coincidence or an unusual happening:
'It was a miracle that the fall didn't kill her, a million to one chance...'
2. a dramatic and unusual sign of God's power above the ordinary laws of nature. Christians view the miracles of Jesus as miracles in this second sense.

What kinds of miracles did Jesus work?

1. **nature miracles**
power over the forces of nature, for example, the Calming of the Storm (4:35-41).
2. **healing miracles**
power over sickness and evil, for example, the Cure of Simon's mother-in-law (1:29-31).

Miracles and Faith

St Mark's Gospel highlights the importance of faith *before* the miracle. Miracles are not magic shows. Miracles are given in response to real faith. *'Your faith has saved you,'* Jesus would often say after working a miracle. In the miracle accounts, faith is shown in two ways: *faith in word* and *faith in gesture*.

• Faith in word

Some showed their faith by confidently asking Jesus. For example, Jairus asked Jesus to make his sick daughter well again (Mk 5:21-43).

• Faith in gesture

Some believed that if they simply came into contact with Jesus or touched his garment they'd be made well. For example, the sick woman (Mk 5:25-34).

Jesus the Saviour

'Saviour' is a modern title although it is 'undercover' in St Mark's Gospel. Every time the name 'Jesus' is written, its meaning - *'God is salvation'* - goes with it. Mark uses the personal name 'Jesus' regularly throughout his gospel. The name wasn't uncommon at the time; an alternative version is 'Joshua'.

Christians believe that the salvation God offers is intended for all. Only God can save; to call Jesus saviour is to call him God. The miracles are great signs of the saving work Jesus came to do. Christians believe that work goes on - Jesus still saves. His salvation is for all humans, and for all time. He saves us from sin and death, winning for us eternal life. Jesus' salvation is more than just a rescue, a *saving from*; it is a *saving for*. Jesus saves us *from* sin and death, and *for* eternal life.

Calming of the storm 4:35-41

Jesus stood up and commanded the wind, 'Be quiet!' and he said to the waves' (4:38-41)



Hills partially surround Lake Galilee. This gives the Lake some strange quirks – storms can blow up at a moment's notice and cease just as quickly. Galilee's fishermen have always needed to be brave.

In Hebrew Scriptures, only God could control natural forces: *'God our saviour... you calm the clamour of the ocean, the clamour of its waves.'* (Psalm 65:5- 7). Jesus does what God does – control the weather. The disciples are awe-struck. Hence the question: Who is this man?

There is a message for the early church (a boat), rocked on a sea of persecution: **'Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?'** (4:40). Jesus will save them.



Jairus' Daughter (5:21-24, 35-43)

He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha, koum,' which means, 'Little girl, I tell you to get up.' (5:41)



Jairus shows his faith right from the start: he doesn't merely ask Jesus to see his daughter, but to make her well again. He and his wife, with the inner circle of Peter, James and John, get to see this miracle. Those outside show no faith and do not witness firsthand Jesus' power over death.

Woman with a haemorrhage 5:24-34

'If I can touch even his clothes ... I shall be well again.' (5:28)

This poor woman had suffered for twelve years, spent all her money on unsuccessful treatments, and was getting worse. Jesus was her last hope. Her faith is shown in a gesture: the touching of Jesus' garment.



The power of faith is shown vividly here. Think of the dozens of people pressing around Jesus. At least some of them would have sicknesses and pains. Touching his garment doesn't give them a magical cure. Only the touch of faith brings a miracle.

There is another beautiful, but hidden, detail. The woman's complaint – probably menstrual bleeding – made her 'religiously unclean' and unable to take part in worship. Her 'undercover approach' to Jesus was partly because others would not wish to have contact with her and themselves be made religiously unclean. That's also why she *secretly* touches Jesus, and why she's terribly afraid when found out. Jesus praises her faith – 'it has saved her'. In other words, she's not just physically cured, but also brought into God's Kingdom.

Feeding of the 5000 (6:30-44)

They all ate as much as they wanted. They collected twelve basketfuls of scraps of bread and pieces of fish. (6:42-43)



This miracle points backwards and forwards:

Backwards, because it echoes the scene in Exodus when God fed the Israelites with bread in the wilderness. The crowd here are gathered in a lonely place. Through Moses God saved his people from slavery, and continued to uphold them. In the same way, Jesus he saves his people by feeding them in the wilderness.

Forwards, because it points to the Last Supper and Eucharist, where Jesus becomes the *Bread of Life*. Perhaps it's also a preview of the 'messianic banquet' – the joyful feasting that was for Jews a picture of what God's Kingdom in all its fullness is like.

Notice that Jesus spends hours teaching the crowds before the miracle itself. They didn't follow him for a free supper so much as to hear his words. For Christians this suggests the crowd had another hunger beside physical hunger – the *spiritual* hunger for the good news.

Syro-Phoenecian woman's daughter 7:24-30

'Sir ...even the dogs under the table eat the children's leftovers.' (7:27-28)

Quite often miracles are preceded by a *test* of faith. In the Calming of the Storm, Jesus is asleep at the moment of crisis; in the Feeding of the 5000, Jesus tells the disciples to feed the crowd themselves. In the healing of the daughter, Jesus tests the mother's faith by appearing to rudely dismiss her appeal. She passes the test.

This incident highlights the one 'qualification' needed for salvation: faith. Jesus did not just come for the Jews. This gentile woman will not be put down: she shows faith and determination. The daughter doesn't even have to present for the cure to work. Message for the early Church: Jesus saves the person with faith - Jew or gentile.

The epileptic boy (9:14-29)

'Have pity on us and help us, if you possibly can!' 'Yes,' said Jesus, 'if you yourself can. Everything is possible for the person who has faith.' (9:23)

Happening straight after the Transfiguration, the lack of faith comes as a blow to Jesus – brings him down to earth.

The people believed that evil spirits were behind illnesses. The boy's symptoms point to epilepsy, though his father testifies that an evil spirit is within him, trying to hurt him. 'If you possibly can' shows a weakness of faith

in the father. Nonetheless, he tries again to show faith and Jesus heals the boy.

Although Jesus had given the disciples authority to heal (cf. 3:15), they were not able to do so here. The Greek used for 'not able' also means 'not strong enough'. Jesus shows the Messiah's strength to overcome evil.

At the end he tells them that lack of prayer was behind their failure. The message is that deep faith springs from prayer. Jesus sets the example. He spent nights in prayer (cf. 1:35, 6:45) – hours of communion dialogue with his Father.

Activities

- 1 Write a sentence with the correct ending for each of the options below.

For Christians, the miracles of Jesus are extraordinary

- A coincidences.
- B acts of magic.
- C signs of God's power.

An example of a nature miracle is

- A the cure of a blind man.
- B the calming of the storm.
- C the raising of Jairus' daughter.

An example of a healing miracle is

- A the walking on water.
- B the cure of the paralysed man.
- C the calming of the storm.

Before working a miracle, Jesus often

- A wanted an audience to see it.
- B wanted to see signs of faith.
- C wanted some kind of payment.

The greatest miracle is

- A the feeding of the 5000.
- B the Resurrection of Jesus.
- C the raising of Lazarus.

For Christians the miracles are signs of

- A mysterious natural powers.
- B the final victory of God's Kingdom.
- C the people's wish for magic.

2 Pick and read **one** of the miracle accounts beside.

a) **Analyse** the miracle account.

Was it a nature or healing miracle?

Did Jesus test the faith of the person(s)?

*Was faith shown?
By word, gesture, both?*

Did Jesus say anything as he worked the miracle?

Reactions of those around?

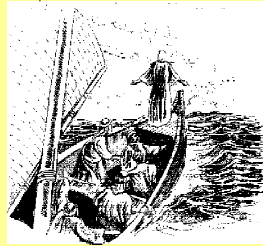
Why was it important that Jesus 'backed up' his preaching with miracles?

3 a) Imagine St Mark is defining the word 'miracle'. Use the meanings of the Greek words for miracle to put together his definition.

Ergon = work
Dunamis = power
Semeion = sign

b) Read the true stories beside. What does the word 'miracle' mean in these stories?

c) Do you think 'miracle' means the same here as it does for 'miracle of Jesus'? Explain.



(A) *Calming of the Storm*
Mk 4:35-41



(B) *Woman cured*
Mk 5:25-34



(B) *Daughter raised*
Mk 5:21-43



(D) *Feeding of 5000*
Mk 6:30-44

POLICE monitoring traffic on the M6 were appalled to see a motorist changing a flat tyre. He was carrying out his repair in the overtaking lane of one of the busiest roads in Europe. A police officer said: "Cars coming round the corner could not see him until they were just yards away. It's a miracle no one was seriously injured."

A man interested in old cameras came across one in an antiques shop. He bought it. He discovered that there was still film in the camera, which he had developed. The pictures turned out to be over forty years old. One was a picture of a boy fishing at the river's edge. The boy was none other than he. It seemed a miracle.