

MIRACLES: FOR CHRISTIANS TODAY (II)

For almost 2000 years all Christians accepted that Jesus really did work miracles. Then, in recent centuries, some thinkers argued the miracles are mythological additions to a purer Gospel. Today Christians still argue about whether the miracles of Jesus were 'real'.

Liberal Interpretation

Some Christians say that Gospel miracles stories are not literally true. They are like colourful touches added to the picture of Jesus. Miracles get across beliefs and meanings rather than being realities themselves. For example, a miracle of driving out a demon (exorcism) doesn't literally mean a demon vacating a soul; it only shows the belief that Jesus had come to conquer evil.

Many Christians reject this view. To them it's like throwing the baby out with the bath water. The whole story of Jesus starts with a miracle (Incarnation), climaxes with a miracle (Resurrection) and ends with a miracle (Ascension). If you reject the miracles of Jesus' public life, you basically reject Christianity. You'd also have to believe the evangelists were telling lies about miracles – if so, how can anything they say be trusted?

Fundamental Interpretation

Other Christians insist that not only are the miracle accounts true, but also that they are *literally* true down to the last detail. Mark writes that Jesus fed 5000 men, and this figure must be exact.

Again, while many Christians believe that Jesus' worked miracles, they don't accept God dictated the Gospels to the evangelists in some sort of trance. The Light of Inspiration wasn't to overpower the mind of the evangelists, rather to help them set down in their own way what God wanted to be set down.

Conservative Interpretation

Other Christians, for example, Roman Catholics, accept that Jesus' miracles were real miracles - extraordinary signs of God's power in and through the person of Jesus. However, they accept that miracle accounts, like other parts of the Gospel, were passed down in 'memorable packets' by the Christian oral tradition and edited by the evangelists themselves. None of this means the miracle accounts were falsified.

This view contradicts the 'miracles-are-mythology' view of the liberal interpreter. It also contradicts the 'miracle-accounts – literally-true-in-every-detail' view of the fundamentalist interpreter. Yet it is *not* a half way compromise between the two. After all, either miracles are real or they are not. Conservative interpreters believe that Jesus' miracles were a real and essential part of his ministry.

Modern Miracles?

Do miracles still happen? Many Christians believe they do. They would argue that miraculous healings have occurred throughout Church history as special signs of God's power. For example, Catholic Christians visit places of pilgrimage like Lourdes in France partly because they are linked with miraculous healings.

MIRACULOUS RECOVERY FROM MS

THE Bishop of Lourdes has declared the recovery of a 51-year-old sufferer from multiple sclerosis to be inexplicable. The shrine's medical experts have taken almost 12 years to investigate the case of Jean-Pierre Bély, a medical worker from Angoulême, France, who recovered from his severe illness on Oct 9, 1987, the night after receiving "the sacrament of the sick" at the Lourdes shrine.

The Church has dismissed about 6,500 and approved 66 similar cures after lengthy investigation. M Bély, who had suffered from multiple sclerosis since 1972, was wheelchair-bound at the time of his pilgrimage to the shrine. Yesterday, after twelve years of full health, he said the cure was "a warmth which began in my toes and moved slowly up my legs before it invaded every cell in my body". He said: "That night I heard a voice, full of tenderness, telling me to rise up and walk."

The Bishop of Angoulême said the cure was "a personal gift from God to this man". He avoided using the word 'miracle', used by the Church for the actions of Jesus.

Discuss

Read the news report beside.

- Do you think the Catholic Church took sufficient precautions before approving the cure as miraculous?
- What's your verdict on what happened?

Activities

1 Read the three interpretations about the *Calming of the Storm* (4:35-41).

- Identify, giving a reason, which opinion is a liberal interpretation, a fundamentalist interpretation, a conservative interpretation.
- Many Christians would argue that it is impossible to be a Christian without being a believer in miracles.

What reasons might they give for their view?

X It happened exactly as Mark tells it. All the quotes are exact - as are the details about Jesus asleep on a cushion. It was clearly a nature miracle.

Y It never happened – or if it did, it certainly wasn't miraculous. Storms do start and stop suddenly on Lake Galilee. The point is that Mark wants to show Jesus as divine – able to control weather.

Z It was a miracle. The account may have been arranged to fit a set pattern but this in no way contradicts the miracle itself. Besides, details about other boats and the cushion suggest an eyewitness who told Mark everything.

2 'It is unrealistic for Christians today to believe in miracles.' Evaluate this statement.

For ...

- miracles may be mythical ways to make the 'Jesus story' more vivid
- maybe Jesus himself had the power to work miracles, but that time is over
- maybe 'modern miracles' have a rational explanation
- instead of praying for miracles, Christians should pray for strength to cope with whatever they have to cope with
- how do Christians explain the lack of miracles when they're most needed – say, in Auschwitz?
...

Against ...

- miracles still happen – '*believers will be given power to perform miracles*' (Mk 16:17)
- miraculous signs were part of the early Church's experience
- if miracles happen less these days, it's because of weak faith
- the Catholic Church has always accepted that God's power can still show itself in miraculous ways
- people always find a reason not to believe, even when the evidence for something miraculous is overwhelming ...