

WHAT IS A MIRACLE?

1 Kings 17: 8 -16; Matt. 14: 13 - 21

What is a "miracle"? Tiny birds with fragile little bodies no bigger than a handspan, carry within themselves the instinct to accurately travel thousands of miles from the northern Arctic to South America each year in their migratory pattern.

The Hubble Space telescope photos have revealed that the universe in which we live contains more than fifty billion galaxies, each with hundreds of thousand of stars.

Every one of us possesses a human body which is a marvel of creation and inter connectedness, in which millions of cells somehow function in unison and cooperation to enable us to think and to act and to be. All these things are part of the reality of the world around us, yet all are "miraculous" in the sense that most of us find our minds yawning far beyond where they can stretch in order to comprehend the wonder of it.

What is a miracle?

A miracle perhaps is looking at the stuff of life in a different way, seeing through new eyes. Maybe this is the approach we need to take in reflecting on the so called miracle stories of our Scriptures, as stories which can help us to understand in fresh ways what faith is all about. We have just heard two of those stories read from Scripture this morning.

But in the Bible, events which are described as miracles are not merely supernatural happenings occurring randomly and in isolation. Miracles are always understood as special manifestations of divine power, for a particular purpose or reason.

And for hundreds of years of course, up until the eighteenth century in the Western world when we entered the so called Age of Reason, most people had no difficulty in accepting that miraculous happenings could, and did, occur.

Things that had no apparent rational explanation but were seen as being brought about by God. But once modern forms of thinking -that there must be a logical reason for everything - took over, miracles were no longer taken for granted but came under microscopic attention.

And people took a variety of different approaches. Some stuck to the old beliefs - you don't question the traditional understanding of Scripture.

Others simply moved to an attitude of unbelief - we can't explain it, therefore it didn't really happen.

A third approach has been to say - yes, these events happened but it's possible to find a logical explanation.

This approach for example, would look at the story we read this morning about Jesus feeding thousands of people.

And say - well what really happened was that all those who had brought food with them but didn't want to share were shamed into producing it out of their bags and passing it around.

But trying to simply explain away these so called miracle stories totally misses the point. The impact on those who were involved in that particular incident when Jesus fed a large crowd, must have been extraordinarily profound in its effect.

It's one of the few stories about Jesus which appears in somewhat similar form in all four gospels - Mark and Matthew both even tell it twice over.

And it would certainly remind its first Jewish hearers of the ancient story of Elijah we also read from the Hebrew Scriptures.

But we come as people of the twenty first century to make our own reflections on this narrative, recognizing that within it there is meaning and significance for us also.

We may not look at the story in the same way as people of the first Christian century, but there are insights which emerge that remain timeless and universal.

Some seemingly very simple actions of Jesus which may enable us to see with fresh eyes ways of living in relationship with one another, and how we are to live in relationship to God.

Firstly, those who wrote down this story recognized that Jesus "had compassion" for the people who were crowding around him. He cared, he felt for people in their need. It was evening, time for people to eat who had come a long way following him, and there was no place to get food.

Jesus' actions always reflect God who cares about human beings in their basic needs. God of steadfast love and faithfulness, who encourages us in our relationships to show forth this same quality of compassion and care, to have eyes to see and recognize needs.

And in this particular story the focus is on one specific human need - the need for food. Perhaps we, living as we do in a society where food is plentiful and for most of us, easily obtainable, don't reflect nearly as much as we should on the central role the need for nourishment plays in our lives.

One of the things which binds all human beings together is that we must eat in order to live. Hunger is a universally felt sensation equalizing all people, and failure to satisfy hunger leads inevitably to starvation

and eventual death. When Jesus serves food to a hungry and needy crowd without any discrimination, he emphasizes the importance of food as one of God's gifts to all creation.

By his actions he manifests that in the eyes of God, food is not a commodity to be hoarded or a weapon used to control.

Nor should its' provision be solely dependent on the ability to pay for it.

Secondly, Jesus takes the basic elements of the diet of poor peasants of Galilee. Bread, and fish.

"Bread" is used all through the Scriptures to represent both something that satisfies our physical hunger but also our spiritual needs. It has been said that to be concerned about our own bread is a materialistic question, but to be concerned about our neighbour's bread is a spiritual question.

In this story we find the two woven together in ways we can recognize and name. Jesus takes the bread and blesses it - linking together both the earthly and sacramental aspects of eating.

Jesus' only requirement as he invites all to eat is that we are hungry for the meal, for the nourishment which he can provide. This was true of the original event we are thinking about, it is also true of the Lord's table, communion or mass, to which we come as God's people.

It is what Jesus meant when he called himself "the bread of life".

The Lord's Supper has always been based on our need first to receive from God, and then to respond by going out and meeting the needs of others, both physical and spiritual.

The importance of compassion, the integral significance of food both physical and spiritual, and there is also a third element to this story. Notice how not only Jesus, but other humans are an essential part of the narrative.

Look at the role played by the disciples. How first of all they said to Jesus - Yes, there's a problem but we are not going to be part of the solution.

"Send the people away to buy food for themselves in the village."

And Jesus forces them to take initiative, accept some responsibility.

"They needn't go away - you give them something to eat".

Well, we do have some food, they said, just a little bit we planned to keep for our own supper. And so they gave it to Jesus, and then Jesus, after blessing it, gave it back to them to distribute.

Once the disciples were willing to contribute, to give the little they had to be shared, God was able to provide so that all needs were met.

The marvel, the miracle is what can be possible if we are open and prepared to give what we have - of our gifts of time or money or whatever else there is we can place in God's hands. The implication for us is that God's way is to work through people.

That the miracle is what God makes possible through us and among us, by the mysterious power of God's love expressed in Jesus Christ. Sometimes, like those disciples, we only see the size of the problem and are intimidated. But Jesus encouraged them to start where they could, with what they had, and astonishingly, by the grace of God, it was sufficient.

We don't always see the results of our actions, but we can be enabled to act as if miracles are possible - as if the Kingdom of God is already among us.

Can we make a difference?

We will only know if we begin!

A verse of the hymn we heard expresses this -

"Come learn of me the Servant says and multiplies the feast
Of loaves and fish, of bread and wine, transforming every guest
Come, says the Host, from west and east, bring gifts to share, come eat!
None lost or wasted when God's feast of joy will be complete".

Let us pray: Loving God, when we have doubts challenge us and equip us to be your body in the world. Inspire us to give without holding back, and to offer our whole selves to you in the name of Jesus Christ.