SIGNS AND WONDERS

CONTEMPLATING THE MIRACLES OF THE GOSPELS

By JOHN BLIGH

I

THE 'MIRACLES' of the Gospels, as we call them, are more commonly described by the evangelists as *dynameis*, that is, 'acts of power'. The intention of Jesus, when he cured the sick or possessed, was to cure the sick or possessed; but what struck the bystanders was the display of power involved in the cure. Jesus himself was not anxious to perform miracles in order to display his power. He did not seek glory for himself through his miracles; St Matthew and St Mark both repeatedly show that he avoided any such publicity: 'He cured all who were ill; and he gave strict injunctions that they were not to make him known'.[1] These injunctions were often disobeyed, and the fame of Jesus spread. But it was never his intention to win fame by displays of miraculous power.

The effect of these sometimes almost unwilling demonstrations of power was to make the bystanders gasp with wonder, admiration and even fear. After the cure of a paralytic in Mark 2, 1–12, for example, the evangelist says that the bystanders 'were all amazed and glorified God, saying, We never saw anything like this!' After the cure of the demoniac and the destruction of the Gerasene swine, the people 'were afraid' and begged Jesus to leave their district. The 'fear' in question is doubtless religious awe – that feeling approaching panic which a man experiences in the presence of the numinous and the incalculable.

Although the miracles of Jesus were not primarily designed to be manifestations of his power, they were nevertheless revelatory acts. As St John says at the end of his first miracle narrative: 'This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory'.[2] Suppose a man is standing on a railway platform and sees a child fall on to the track when a train is approaching: he leaps down and pulls the child to safety in the nick of time. In so doing, he reveals his courage. But he did not leap down from the platform in order to display his courage. In the same way Jesus reveals his

[1] Mt 12, 15–16.

[2] Jn 2, 11.

power and his glory in cures and in providing food and drink for the hungry and thirsty, even though this revelation is not his primary intention. Revelation is a side-effect of salvation. Acts of power are at the same time 'signs', pointing to something.

It is very largely through his miracles that Jesus reveals who he is. After the stilling of the tempest, says St Mark, the disciples 'were filled with awe, and said to one another, Who, then, is this, that even wind and sea obey him?'[3] According to St Matthew, they also supplied the answer to their question: 'And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, Truly you are the Son of God!'[4]

Above all, the miracles reveal Jesus as a *saviour*, who is able to take away the physical and spiritual ills of suffering men and women. St Matthew quotes Isaiah 53 in connection with the healing ministry of Jesus: 'That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, He took our infirmities and bore our diseases'. In the raising of Jairus' daughter and the cure of the woman with a flux,[5] he reveals his power to save us from the deep and hidden wounds that afflict our nature, and even from the last enemy, death. In all these acts, he lives up to his name: he is Jesus, the Saviour.

The crowds who gathered about Jesus came both to witness his wonderful acts and perhaps to experience in their own persons his saving power.[6] The evangelists expected their narratives to have the same attractive power, or rather to extend the original attractive power of the miracles of Jesus. A docile reader, who is disposed to believe that the evangelists' accounts record real events, will share the wonder and awe of the first witnesses; he will ponder the question, 'Who, then, is this, that even wind and sea obey him?', and he will desire to experience the saving power of Jesus in his own heart and mind and soul. St John discloses his own expectations at the end of his gospel: 'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name'.[7]

In spite of the lapse of so many centuries, the gospels still have the effect that the evangelists intended. When a reader is unfamiliar with the gospels, even if he is not well disposed to christianity, the

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[3] Mk 4, 41. [4] Mt 14, 33. [5] Mk 5, 21–43.
[6] Cf Jn 6, 1–2, 14. [7] Jn 20, 30–31.

gospel narratives can still have a profound effect. Archbishop Anthony Bloom has described how in his youth, as an unbelieving student at Paris University, he listened reluctantly to a lecture by a priest, and then went home angrily to check up on what the priest had said. He asked his mother for a bible, counted the pages to see which gospel was the shortest, and started reading St Mark. By the time he reached chapter four, he became aware of a Presence, and that was the beginning of his conversion. Such stories are not rare in spiritual biographies. The policy of the British and Foreign Bible Society, to spread the gospel by distributing bibles, may seem rather impersonal; but it works. The Spirit still appeals to new generations through the inspired texts. The written and printed gospels are still effective instruments of evangelization.

Unfortunately, for the cradle-christian who has been familiar with the gospels since the time when he first learned to read, the miracle stories cannot have the same potency. Constant repetition, in the liturgy, in para-liturgical prayer-meetings, in the lecture room and in private study, gradually steals away their power to evoke wonder and awe. St Augustine once remarked in a brilliant phrase that miracles of nature such as the multiplication of grain in any wheat harvest *assiduitate viluerunt* – they have become of little account, and have lost their power to astound us, through constant repetition. The same is true to a great extent of the miracle narratives of the gospels: they lose their power through constant repetition. It is regrettable, but psychologically it seems inevitable.

What, then, shall we say? Would we do well to read the gospels less frequently, in the hope that they will regain their power to surprise and astound us? Or should we conclude that the miracle stories are of use at the outset of the christian life, to bring a man to the initial act of faith, but have little further to teach him, once he has committed himself to Christ and his Church?

The first of these two suggestions is not altogether absurd. An inspired text is like inspired music: one can hear it too often, and then it ceases to inspire. The catholic theology of inspiration rightly glorifies the spiritual potency of the inspired books; but it can exaggerate the benefits to be derived from reading the bible, and it can cause good people to forget the spiritual benefits to be derived from books which are not in the technical sense 'inspired'. The voice of wisdom is to be heard in other texts besides the bible – in many a passage of Shakespeare, for example. It is a mistake to look for spiritual inspiration and instruction in the scriptures alone. In

the BBC's programme 'Desert Island Discs', the castaway is always allowed to take with him both the bible and Shakespeare. I have often wondered which of the two the castaway would in fact read, and with what effect. A castaway nun would probably devote most of her time to the bible; yet where in the bible would she find such excellent advice for an unmarried girl as the following from *Hamlet?*

Laertes: For Hamlet and the trifling of his favour,
Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood,
A violet in the youth of primy nature,
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting.
The perfume and suppliance of a minute;
No more.
Ophelia: No more but so?
Laertes: Think it no more:
For nature crescent does not grow alone
In thews and bulk; but as this temple waxes,
The inward service of the mind and soul
Grows wide withal. Perhaps he loves you now;
And now no soil nor cautel doth besmirch
The virtue of his will: but you must fear,
His greatness being weighed, his will is not his own;
For he himself is subject to his birth:
He may not as unvalued persons do
Carve for himself; for on his choice depends
The safety and the health of the whole state;
And therefore must his choice be circumscribed
Unto the voice and yielding of that body
Whereof he is the head. Then if he says he loves you,
It fits your wisdom so far to believe it
As he in his particular act and place
May give his saying deed; which is no further
Than the main voice of Denmark goes withal.
Then weigh what loss your honour may sustain,
If with too credent ear you list his songs,
Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
To his unmastered importunity.
Fear it Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister
And keep you in the rear of your affection,
Out of the shot and danger of desire.[8]

True, there is little need of such advice when one is cast away on a desert island. However, as we know from Shakespeare's *Tempest,*

[8] Act I, Scene III.

all kinds of people get cast away on desert islands; and Shakespeare has taken care to show us, in the same play, what a boy and girl should do when left alone on a desert island: they should play chess! The books of the bible contain the accumulation of wisdom which the jews and early christians wished to pass on to their descendants. The theology of inspiration must not conceal from us that the writers of other nations, too, have laid up a store of wisdom for us. Readers of *The Way* and other serious-minded christians may expect too much of the reading of the scriptures; and excessive attention to the scriptures may lead them to neglect other valid sources of inspiration. In liturgical homilies we are all a little tired (if the truth may be told) of references to Moses and company in the desert. A homilist who is familiar with other fields of literature can bring in a breath of fresh air. (But somewhat too much of this!)

That the gospels and in particular the miracle stories belong mainly to the introductory or kerygmatic stages of the christian teaching should, I think, be admitted. They disclose to the reader who Jesus is, and how he came to be rejected by the jews and crucified – two matters which a catechist or evangelist must explain to a prospective convert at the outset of his instruction. St Mark's Gospel has been called 'a passion narrative with an extended introduction', in the sense that before announcing that the death of Jesus was the sacrifice of our redemption, the evangelist must explain who Jesus is and how he came to be crucified. Almost from the beginning of his gospel St Mark places the miracle stories within the framework of the debate between Jesus and his critics. In a narrative such as the following the evangelist focuses attention not so much on the miraculous aspect of the incident as on the hostile reaction of the pharisees:

> Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. And they watched him, to see whether he would heal him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come here'. And he said to them, 'Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand'. He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the herodians against him, how to destroy him.[9]

[9] Mk 3, 1–6.

Once a christian has been instructed about who Jesus is and how he came to be rejected, it may seem that such miracle stories have nothing more to teach him. I shall try to show that this is not so; the miracle stories can continue to be a help and inspiration, if they are used intelligently. But first a word must be said about the principal obstacle which prevents many readers from gaining any profit at all from the miracle stories.

II

Can we feel sure that the miracles described by the evangelists actually occurred? Has not the 'modern approach' discredited the old-fashioned view that Jesus actually did walk on water, cast out devils, and ascend into heaven? Do not these things belong to the folklore of the Church? Is it not a kind of neo-fundamentalism to try to defend the historicity of the gospels? Since nobody wants to be called a neo-fundamentalist, preachers and teachers have become extremely chary about saying or implying that any particular miracle actually took place. But it is very difficult to contemplate with wonder or with awe an event which may not have happened at all. If so learned and devout an exegete as Professor Dodd regards the wine miracle at Cana as unhistorical, what is the poor curate to say about it on a Sunday morning? If he makes ambiguous noises and betrays his embarrassment, he deserves much sympathy.

It is no use sweeping the difficulties under the carpet. First of all, our thinking about the past is incurably analogical. When we read any narrative of the past, if the actions described are similar to the behaviour of men and women within our own experience, we are inclined to believe the historian; otherwise we wonder if he is not mistaken or misled. The roman historian Tacitus had heard that the shores of Britain were strewn with pearls; arguing analogically, he concluded that the pearls must be of very poor quality. The alternative, to suppose that the british are less acquisitive than other men, seemed to him unlikely. Most modern readers, even believing christians, when they ponder the gospel miracles, can find no parallel within their experience. The evangelists appear to say that miraculous cures will continue to occur as long as the gospel is preached;[10] the promise does not appear to be fulfilled in the literal sense, and it is not easy to recognize any spiritual analogue. Few men, for

[10] Cf Mk 16, 17; Jn 14, 12.

example, can say with conviction: 'I was born spiritually blind, my conversion to Christ was an awakening comparable to the cure of the man born blind in John 9'.

Secondly, when we examine the miracle stories of the Old Testament, there are good reasons for thinking that most or perhaps all of them belong to the genre of folklore rather than history. Miracles are reported as having occurred in only two periods of old testament history – in the days of Moses and Joshua and in the days of Elijah and Elisha. The miraculous elements in the exodus tradition were undoubtedly magnified as time went on and the story improved with the telling; and the miracles of Elijah and Elisha obviously belong to the genre of folklore. Take, for example the story of Elisha and the forty bad boys:

> He went up from there to Bethel; and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him saying, 'Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!' And he turned around and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord. And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys. From there he went on to Mount Carmel and thence he returned to Samaria.[11]

If this story is read out in the liturgy today, it still gives great pleasure, and can be made to furnish some valuable moral lessons about the reverence due to ministers of religion, particularly if bald; but no one believes it. Now our judgement of the old testament miracles cannot but affect our attitude to the gospel miracles. It is difficult to maintain the position that the miracle stories of the old testament are fictional but that those of the New Testament are historical. At a liturgy where the old testament reading tells of the manna in the desert and the gospel is the feeding of the five thousand, most participants will feel uneasy if the homilist accepts the one miracle at its face value and explains the other away as a natural event or a creation of pious meditation. Here again, our reasoning is analogical: the closest analogues we have to the gospel miracles are the old testament miracles; as we do not regard the latter as historical we are not inclined to accept the gospel miracles as historical either.

Thirdly, it is very hard for the modern reader to believe that the ascension took place just as it is narrated by St Luke in his gospel

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[11] 2 Kg 2, 23–25.

and Acts. He seems to have used the cosmological picture of his contemporaries (with heaven 'up there'), much as the author of Genesis used the cosmology of his contemporaries, to convey spiritual instruction in a pictorial form. But once we have begun to wonder about the historicity of the ascension narrative, our questioning spreads to other narratives: may not some of the other post-resurrection narratives be theological constructions? And if the evangelists had skill enough to create the resurrection narratives, may they not also have created the miracle stories of the public ministry as vehicles for instruction? There are various ways of dealing with this difficulty, which need not be rehearsed here. None of them is fully satisfactory. The difficulty continues to nag.

There is, therefore, a great danger that the miracle stories will lead the modern student to the wrong kind of wonder: instead of wondering at the power of God displayed in the events narrated, he wonders whether the events really took place – which is an unprofitable kind of wondering, and may even be harmful to faith. Some scripture scholars and preachers are content to say: 'At least we can read the miracle stories as expressions of the faith of the early Church'. But few people will find satisfaction for long in this position. A further question will soon arise: 'How could any evangelist feel justified in creating such stories, if the alleged event did not take place?' If the narratives were created by earlier writers and mistakenly taken by the evangelists to be historical records,[12] how could the holy Spirit permit the evangelists to make such mistakes about the nature of their sources? Here is a major difficulty for modern readers of the gospels. If we cannot solve it, can we perhaps find a way of circumventing it?

III

The debate about the historicity of the gospel miracles is one part of the quest of the historical Jesus. What was Jesus like? Was he really a miracle worker such as the evangelists describe? To judge from its past history, the quest is never likely to come to a successful issue. But perhaps this does not matter too much. It is a very remarkable thing that while we find it so difficult to describe the historical Jesus, we do not find it difficult at all to describe the christian spirit. We know very well what is meant by a christ-like char-

[12] Cf Jn 20, 31.

acter; the gospels and epistles present the same picture. The true disciple of Christ has a firm faith in God his Father, believes that he must render an account of his life at the Judgment, is true to his word and honest in money matters, is chaste even in thought, is gentle, unassuming, kind, cheerful, compassionate, ready to forgive, desirous of peace, ready to suffer in the cause of justice, and he cares for his poorer neighbour. Christ our Lord was such a man. The task of the Church is to form men in his image; or perhaps it is better to say, the task of the members of the Church is to help one another to grow into the likeness of Christ as he is remembered in the living tradition of the Church. The miracle stories of the gospels are of value to us in so far as they help us to foster this spirit in ourselves and in other people.

But how can we make them serve this purpose? Let me offer two suggestions. In the first place, the miracle stories can be read as pictorial descriptions of the saving power of God: even if historically Jesus did not do what is narrated, yet God is able to do this kind of thing, and we are in need of his ministrations. We can compare ourselves or identify ourselves with the recipients of the miracles, and the process will be found to foster prayer. We read how Jesus raised the mother-in-law of Peter from her fever, and we reflect (with St Augustine) that we too suffer from bouts of fever: 'pride is our fever, covetousness is our fever, lust is our fever', and so on. To become aware of our weaknesses is the first step towards the obtaining of a cure through the power of God. Or take the story of the cure of the syro-phoenician woman's daughter:

> And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold a canaanite woman from that region came out and cried 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon'. But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she is crying after us'. He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. But she came and knelt before him saying, 'Lord, help me'. And he answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs'. She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table'. Then Jesus answered her, 'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire'. And her daughter was healed instantly.[13]

Did Jesus really speak so harshly to this poor woman? Why did

[13] Mt 15, 21–28.

he adopt this attitude of racial superiority? Let us leave aside these speculations and identify ourselves with the woman; by so doing we can learn the power of persistent prayer to win for others an intervention of God's healing power. Setting aside unprofitable arguments about the history of this or that miracle, we can use any miracle story as a stimulant to renew our awareness of present relationships: our present weakness, and the present power of God our Saviour. Because the Word of God is entrusted to human keeping, christianity is to some extent what we make of it. We can consume too much of our spiritual energy in study of the past, and in study of origins; what really matters is the power of the Spirit at work here and now recreating the image of Christ in a new generation. The miracle stories, if we enter into them by identifying ourselves with their beneficiaries, can greatly help us to place ourselves in the right disposition to experience God's transforming grace.

My second suggestion is one which I have already illustrated in a series of scripture readings in *The Way*.[14] If the miracle stories are losing their efficacy through over-familiarity, one way to find fresh interest in them is to bring them into conjunction with significant parallels. In the series of scripture readings I showed, chiefly from St Matthew, that the evangelists themselves have balanced their narratives off one against another in chains of 'matching passages'. When one familiar text is compared with another, some fresh aspect of it comes to light; the texts are not new, but the comparison is. Interest is renewed, and the mind is stimulated to fresh activity. It is much to be regretted that in the new lectionary, little effort has been made to ensure that the readings on ordinary days truly 'match' one another. However, even in a fortuitous conjunction of texts it is often possible to find significant points of comparison and contrast, particularly if one is blessed with the charism of ingenuity.

[14] *The Way*, Vol IX (1968), pp 306–17; Vol X (1969), pp 59–73, 148–61, 234–42, 321–30.