MIRACLE, MYSTERY AND PARABLE

By JOHN R. DONAHUE

MIRACLES, once the bulwark of apologetics and of popular piety, have fallen on hard times. Though there is a resurgence of interest in miracles among biblical scholars, theologians often maintain a rather discreet silence. Also, apart from their popularity among catholic charismatics, the gospel miracles often play little part in spiritual renewal. Ignatius, in the body of the *Spiritual Exercises*, proposes no miracle as a contemplative exercise and, of the fifty-two appended meditations on the life of Jesus, only five are miracles and none of these is a healing or exorcism. Miracles can too easily be an instance of a growing gap between the results of biblical exegesis in the Church.

Some initial generalizations are in order. Though one of the burning questions since the Enlightenment has been the historicity of the miracles of Jesus, this is a false question. Most contemporary scholars will admit that Jesus was certainly an exorcist and a charismatic healer, though the historical accuracy of any single account must be critically evaluated. The proper question to ask of miracles is not whether and how they might have happened, but what do they mean. Jesus's miracles have meaning in the context of his proclamation of the kingdom. They are the symbolic prophetic actions by which Jesus, the eschatological prophet, summons people to conversion and change of heart in response to the reign of God. The exorcisms proclaim that in Jesus the power of Satan is broken, and that those evils of sickness and death, which were thought to be the concomitant of the reign of sin, are no longer lords of life.[1] The kingdom is to be the offer of God's mercy to the oppressed and the suffering, and Jesus appears as the one who heals from illness and liberates from oppression. Jesus announces the kingdom with a call to conversion through the offer of unmerited forgiveness, by his fellowship with tax collectors and other outcasts of his society. His healing and exorcizing ministry extends to

[1] Lk 11, 19.

similar outcasts: lepers, Samaritans, children of gentile rulers.[2] Jesus proclaims the kingdom as present, yet still to be fully realized in the future. The miracles announce and inaugurate what the future will offer; they are the *presence* in history of what will be the *promise* of history, a world restored to wholeness and open to God's presence. In the historical ministry of Jesus, the miracles are illustrations of the kingdom which he proclaims; in the gospel accounts of the miracles they become illustrations of Jesus himself.

With the demise of the mechanistic apologetic of miracles (that is, only a divine person can work miracles; Jesus worked miracles, therefore . . .), it became current to call the miracles 'signs', and to see in them certifications of the ministry of Jesus.[3] Such language must be used with reserve. In the synoptic Gospels, miracles are never signs, but mighty works. Of themselves, miracles are not signs or certifications of the presence of the divine. Jesus refuses the request for a sign from heaven; it is the false prophets and false christs who will work miracles.[4] As the charge against Jesus in Mk 3, 22 shows, the working of miracles can be either a sign that the miracle worker is deranged or under the power of Satan. Miracles do not authenticate the divinity of Jesus. Such is the theology of miracles proposed by Satan in the temptation narratives,[5] and of the mockers at the foot of the cross who cry, 'come down from the cross that we may see and believe'.

Mark: miracle and mystery

Prior to Mark, the miracles of Jesus circulated either as individual stories or as clusters of stories which were used by early christian missionaries either for apologetic preaching or community instruction. The danger of such use was that the wonder-working Jesus might achieve a pre-eminence over other aspects of Jesus. By taking over the miracles and putting them in the context of his gospel, Mark not only preserves the tradition, but gives a definite interpretation to it. By combining the traditions of the teaching of Jesus with those traditions of the acts of power of Jesus, Mark lets one interpret the other. Jesus's teaching is now 'new teaching with authority' (1, 27), and the reaction to him as teacher is the same as it is to him as miracle worker.[6] This reaction is not primarily one

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[2] Lk 17, 11–19; 7, 1–10.
[3] Cf Acts 2, 22.
[4] Mk 8, 11–12; 13, 22–23.
[5] Mt 4, 1–11; Lk 4, 1–13.
[6] Compare 1, 27; 2, 12; 4, 41; 5, 15 with 1, 22; 6, 2; 10, 24; 11, 18; 12, 17.

of faith, but of marvel, wonder and fear. The Gospel of Mark ends with those who first hear the message of the resurrection in a stage of trembling, astonishment and fear.[7] The teaching of Jesus, his miracles, and finally the good news about him, all convey that aura of numinous mystery which leaves the believer in a sense of wonder before the transcendent. Mark summons his reader not to an easy faith on the basis of miracles, but to a posture of openness and wonder which is the presupposition to true faith.

Secondly, by 'historicizing' the miracles, that is, by putting them in the narrative context of the life of Jesus, Mark devalues their power as individual stories about the manifestation of the divine, and subordinates them to the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. The miracles now summon to faith not as miracle but as gospel. It is not simply the miracles of Jesus which Mark proclaims, but Jesus of the miracles who summons to belief and conversion.[8]

In taking over the miracles, Mark does not put them simply in the context of a life of Jesus, but in the context of a definite theology of that life. This is an incarnational theology which, while recognizing that the life of Jesus is a 'secret epiphany' of the divine, also wants to confront the radical self-emptying of Jesus and his total assumption of human weakness. Mark unfolds this theology in dramatic fashion by the interplay between Jesus and the disciples, between the mighty works of Jesus and his suffering, along with the engagement of the disciples in these events. Subsequent generations of Christians are called not simply to be spectators in this drama, but actors: not simply to observe but to experience.

In Mark the first act of Jesus's public ministry is to summon disciples.[9] They are called to an intimate familiarity with Jesus; they are witnesses of his first miracles and recipients of private teaching, and are summoned to continue his mission with a share in his works of power.[10] Though so called and empowered, the career of the disciples in Mark represents a decline from the true following of Jesus. In the early chapters of the gospel, they frequently express misunderstanding of Jesus and are at variance with him. A dramatic change in their attitude occurs in the great middle section of the gospel, 8, 27 – 10, 52. This section itself is bracketed by two symbolic miracles of giving of sight – a suggestion to Mark's reader that this is exactly what Jesus is doing in the section.[11] The

[7] Mk 16, 7–8. [8] Mk 1, 14–15. [9] Mk 1, 16–20.
[10] Mk 3, 13–15; 4, 11–12; 6, 7–13. [11] Mk 8, 22–26; 10, 46–52.

chapters are organized around three passion predictions.[12] After each prediction the disciples reject or misunderstand the suffering of Jesus, and Jesus gives them further instruction. In the actual passion narrative, this misunderstanding of the chosen disciples becomes positive failure when one disciple betrays Jesus, when the three leaders sleep during Jesus's agony, and all flee at his arrest; it culminates when Peter, the leader of the twelve, denies Jesus at that very moment when Jesus is confessing who he is.[13]

Mark thus casts Jesus's disciples as dramatic examples of a misunderstood theology of miracles. Mark wants to say that if experience of the mighty works of Jesus leads to a theology which cannot at the same time result in following Jesus along the way of the cross, with the resurrection present only as hope, then this experience becomes the basis of false discipleship. It is this kind of experience and misinterpretation of the power of God which Paul opposes at Corinth. In the Corinthian Letters, Paul is careful to subordinate works of power, speaking in tongues and all other manifestations of God to the criterion of self-divesting love which was manifest in Jesus.[14] For both Paul and Mark the performance of signs and wonders is of itself not a sign of a true apostle or of the presence of Christ. The pauline criterion of power made perfect in weakness finds its parallel in the marcan theology of the cross.[15] Concentration on the mighty works of Jesus should serve to create that sense of awe and wonder which is concomitant to the entry of God into human life. However, miracles can lose their symbolic value and become objects of fascination in themselves. When they do this, they shift the locus of faith away from the mystery of Jesus emptying himself by becoming one with the human experience of trial, pain and death; rather they shift it *in the direction of* a precipitous experience of the power of God manifest in Jesus. The marcan miracle is grace and power; it is also mystery and challenge.

Matthew: Jesus, mighty in word and work

The theology of Matthew and Luke is clear from the way in which the authors incorporate Mark's tradition into their work, from the editorial changes which they make in the narratives, and from their addition of material from their special traditions. One of the strong themes of Matthew, beginning in the infancy narra-

[12] Mk 8, 31; 9, 31; 10, 33.
[13] Cf Mk 14, 62 and 14, 71.
[14] 1 Cor 12–13.
[15] Cf 2 Cor 12, 9; 13, 3–4.

tives, is that Jesus is the new Moses who will teach his people the new Torah, and lead them to a new liberation in order to make of them a new community or *ekklesia*. In taking over the marcan miracles, Matthew collects ten which are scattered throughout Mark and puts them in chapters 8–9, which immediately follow the new Torah of the Sermon on the Mount (chs 5–7). Just as Moses of old was seen as the chosen of God, not simply because he handed on the law which was given on Sinai, but because he was the agent of God's power in bringing the ten plagues on Egypt, so Jesus is the Lord's anointed, mighty in both word and work. Matthew calls attention to this conjunction of word and deed by surrounding chapters five to nine inclusive with two interpretative statements about Jesus's miracles (cf 4, 23; 9, 35).

In addition to collecting the miracles into a unified section, Matthew also re-interprets individual miracles.[16] A very noticeable change is that Matthew tends to condense the descriptive elements of the miracle story. The story of the gerasene demoniac in Matthew occupies roughly one third of the space it occupies in Mark.[17] In retelling the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, Matthew omits the marcan note that Jesus entered the house *with James and John*.[18] In the stilling of the storm, Mark notes that the disciples 'took' Jesus with them into the boat; while Matthew simply states that he got into the boat.[19] Such limitation of the descriptive details, along with a concentration on Jesus, suggests that Matthew moves his readers' attention away from the details of the miracle to the miracle worker Jesus, who appears, more than in Mark, as the authoritative agent of the miracle. Also, in Matthew, the people requesting help from Jesus frequently address him as 'Lord', a title which certainly, by the time of the Gospel, reminds Matthew's readers that Jesus is the risen Lord of the Church.[20]

Matthew also alters the relation of the disciples to the miracles and mitigates Mark's view of the failure of the disciples. The sequence of events in the stilling of the storm vividly illustrates this changed view. In Mark, when the beleaguered disciples cry for help, Jesus awakes, calms the storm and then criticizes the disciples for their lack of faith. In Matthew, after the disciples cry out, Jesus responds: 'Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?', and only

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[16] See H-J Held, 'Matthew as Interpreter of the Miracle Stories', in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (G. Borkamm, G. Barth, H-J Held, London, 1963), pp 165–300.

[17] Cf Mk 5, 1–20 and Mt 8, 28–34.

[18] Mt 8, 14.

[19] Mt 8, 23–27; Mk 4, 35–41.

[20] Mt 8, 2. 6. 21. 25; 9, 28; 14, 30.

then calms the sea and the wind. In Matthew, Jesus comes to the rescue of the little faith of the disciples. Matthew's theology exhibits a special concern for those of little faith, and for little ones.[21] These terms suggest members of Matthew's community (like the weak in Paul) who are in a fragile state of discipleship. In Matthew's version of the stilling of the storm, Jesus the Lord of the Church comes to rescue his community when their faith is shaken. This is Matthew's way of saying that as, during his ministry, Jesus was 'God with us', so too he will be with his Church until the end of the age.

Luke: miracle and mission

Luke is more selective than Matthew in his use of the marcan miracle tradition. He omits six marcan miracles and adds eight of his own.[22] He also recounts twenty individual and ten collective miraculous phenomena in Acts, which are either direct interventions of God (e.g. Pentecost) or are performed by the early apostles, principally Peter and Paul. Both in the gospel and in Acts the miracles are adapted to his major theological themes. Strong in Luke's theology is that Jesus is the new prophet who assumes the major roles of Old Testament prophets like Elijah and Isaiah. In Luke, Jesus begins his ministry by applying to himself the prophetic anointing of Isaiah, 'to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, and liberty to those who are oppressed'.[23] When John's disciples inquire who Jesus is, they are given the response that 'the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them'.[24] The raising of the son of the widow at Nain is a virtual retelling of the raising of the son of the widow of Zarephath by Elijah;[25] and, at the conclusion of the healing, the people proclaim that 'a great prophet has arisen among us and God has visited his people'.[26] In Luke, then, the miracles are more clearly prophetic symbolic actions which validate Jesus as the anointed of God. Although they have a christological concentration similar to that of Matthew, the miracles do not emphasize Jesus as Lord of the Church. For Luke, the period of Jesus is discrete from the period of the Church.

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[21] Mt 6, 30; 8, 26; 14, 31; 16, 8; 18, 6. 10. 14.

[22] Omits Mk 6, 45–52; 7, 24–30; 7, 31–37; 8, 1–10; 8, 22–26; 11, 12–14. 20, and adds Lk 5, 1–11; 7, 1–10; 7, 11–17; 11, 14; 17, 11–19; 22, 50–51.

[23] Lk 4, 16–19; cf Isai 61, 1. 2.

[24] Lk 7, 22.

[25] Cf 1 Kg 17, 1–24.

[26] Lk 7, 16.

The unity arises from the fact that the same Spirit with which Jesus is anointed at the beginning of his ministry, and which moves him to action at crucial points in the ministry, is also at work in the Church. The Church is anointed with the prophetic Spirit at Pentecost, and its centrifugal spread from Jerusalem outwards to Rome is under the impulse of the Spirit. The miracles of the early Church represent the testimony of the Spirit to the prophetic mission of the Church, and in this way they validate the Church in the same way that they validated the ministry of Jesus.

Luke also represents a significant re-interpretation of Mark's view of the relation of disciples to miracles. In Mark's first chapter, the sequence of events is: proclamation of kingdom, call of disciples, first miracles.[27] In Luke, the same incidents appear in the sequence: initial proclamation, miraculous catch of fish and call of disciples.[28] Luke places clear manifestations of Jesus's power before the call. This re-arrangement of material is consistent throughout the gospel. Luke constantly places the call of disciples immediately after a miracle;[29] and he alone notes that those women who followed Jesus in his ministry were those who were healed by him.[30] This same structure informs the Acts of the Apostles, where each outpouring of the Spirit results in missionary activity. In Luke, the manifestation of the power of God at work in Jesus is also a summons to participate in this power.

The miracles of Jesus as adapted by Mark, Matthew and Luke become carriers of the respective theological concerns of each evangelist. While all see miracles as important in answering the christological question, 'who is Jesus?', and the discipleship question, 'what does he ask of us?', the specific answers manifest a theological pluralism at a very early stage of church history. The christology moves from a sense of awe, mystery and reserve in Mark, to the more clear lucan presentation of Jesus as the one who was first endowed with that same prophetic spirit which was to be the gift to the whole Church after Pentecost. While in Mark the miracles provide the occasion for discipleship failure, in Luke they are symbols of that empowerment which the disciple is to share. This pluralism speaks to the Church in different ways. Initially, it provides a model for contemporary pluralism. Just as the first evangelists maintained a dialectic of fidelity to a tradition, while

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[27] Mk 1, 14–34. [28] Lk 5, 1–11. [29] Cf Lk 6, 12–16; 8, 40–56.
[30] Lk 8, 1–3.

at the same time often radically recasting it in the light of new ecclesial problems and new theological considerations, the understanding and function of miracles in the present and future Church will be subject to change. Secondly, the pluralism of the Gospels suggests directions for an understanding of miracle today. There may be groups or individuals who, like the readers of Mark, stand before the miracle in awe and trembling, who find that the miracle so overturns their idea of the expected that they are open to the mystery of God. Others may see in the miracle-working Jesus the one who calms them when their faith is shaken; others may find the miracles as a stimulus to service and mission. Amid this positive pluralism, the contemporary Church must also capture the reserve which the evangelists had about miracles. In Mark it is clear that the false messiahs and false prophets worked miracles; whilst Matthew contains a warning of Jesus against those who say 'Lord, Lord', who prophesy in his name and do mighty works in his name. The same Lord who works miracles for his community of little faith will say to these false prophets, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers'.[31] Miracles and the miracle tradition can never be a substitute for the gospel; they receive their validity only in the context of the integral gospel – as proclaimed and as lived.

Miracle, symbol, parable

Up to this point we have indicated some ways in which miracles illustrate the theology of the synoptic Gospels. In doing so we have shown how miracles are an index of another theological motif: christology or discipleship. The nagging question still remains about how miracles in themselves contribute to contemporary spirituality. Do they have any relevance in a life of prayer and of service today?

This question has been answered in different ways. One way has been to stress the miraculous as a sign of a prior intervention of God in history, and to pray for such interventions into our personal or corporate lives. Another has been to see the gospel miracles as symbols of what God is constantly doing in non-miraculous ways. Such symbolic use is foreshadowed in the gospels. As we have noticed, the giving of sight to the blind men in Mark is symbolic of the insight Jesus will communicate that the way of discipleship is the way of the cross. When Jesus calms the raging storm, the imagery recalls God's power over the waters of chaos and disorder,

[31] Mt 7, 21–22.

and evokes faith in a Lord who can calm personal and social chaos. In Mark, the healing of the paralytic is clearly a symbol of the forgiveness of sin, which suggests the further symbolism that sin is itself paralysis, the inability to move, and that the beginning of freedom from such paralysis is the faith of others. Mark records that Jesus praises the faith of those carrying the paralytic, not his faith, and that the word of forgiveness is a word of liberation which empowers one to walk in freedom.[32] The feeding miracles in John are clearly symbolic of that bounty of Jesus's teaching and of his person, which will become the food which sustains the pilgrim community.[33] This symbolic dimension of miracles, and their symbolic appropriation by the Church, suggest that one fruitful approach to miracles might be to view them by using categories taken from reflection on that other large body of symbolic material of Jesus, his parables. Reflection on the miracle as parable helps us to hear what the miracles have to say to us.

In what is now a classic statement, C. H. Dodd defined parables:

> A metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.[34]

In this definition, Dodd underscores four qualities of parable: (a) its realism or engagement with nature or ordinary life; (b) its symbolic or metaphorical character; (c) its combination of strangeness along with its enticing character; (d) its open-ended quality: the precise application is made by the hearer's engagement with it.

These qualities of the gospel-parables provide convenient ways of viewing the miracles. The realism of the gospel-miracles has long been noted. Unlike miracle accounts from hellenistic literature contemporary with the gospels, and unlike the miracles of the later apocryphal gospels, the gospel-miracles exhibit cautious reserve. They are usually restorations of the order of natural goodness rather than violations of it. The acts of healing are most often by word or by simple touch, not by elaborate or mysterious rituals. It is almost the ordinariness of the miracles which strikes the reader, rather than their 'miraculous' quality. The realism of the miracles, then, portrays the power of God at work in response to the ordinary trials and sorrows of life. Such realism stresses, not the distance between God's power and human history, but God's closeness to it.

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[32] Mt 2, 1–12. [33] Jn ch 6.

[34] *Parables of the Kingdom* (London, 1950), p 16.

Such realism is a caution against certain tendencies in theology: first against the tendency to separate God as present in word from God as present in deed. It is also a caution against any false docetism which would see the action of God apart from engagement in the real world of sickness, suffering and death.

Just as through the realism of the parable, the every-day story becomes the carrier of a deeper meaning, so the physical event of the miracle is a metaphor or symbol of another dimension of meaning. We have already noted the reserve which the synoptic gospels have in describing miracle as sign. As an option to this description, we would like to suggest that miracles be called symbols rather than signs. Signs tend to have a one-to-one correspondence with what they signify; symbols have many levels of meaning. Signs are understood best by description; symbols reveal themselves only through the power of imagination or through lived experience. The miracles are such symbols. They are for the world of nature and human living what the Incarnation of Jesus is for the world of human history: bearers of God's hidden presence in human life, giving a vision of what the fulness of this life is to be. Just as Jesus's life is the eschatological anticipation of the fulness of human existence, so his miracles are eschatological; but they are also realistically perceived symbols of the fulness of the created order.

Allied to the realism and symbolic character of the miracles is their vividness or strangeness. The parables pick the real world as the arena of human change and yet alter this real world. It is realistic that a man be mugged on the way to Jericho; it is strange that the hated Samaritan be the one to stop. It is realistic that a young son might leave home to carve out his independence; it is not as realistic that he be welcomed home and restored to a dignity he did not have before.[35] The parables convey a deeper picture of reality by distorting reality as we know it. This vivid and at times shocking character provides the entrée for the new meaning of the parable. As the constant reaction of awe or surprise attests, miracle also reveals by a surprising recasting of our expectations. Like John the Baptist, we hear the strange report of miracles,[36] challenging us to see the reversal of the ordinary as the sphere of God's revelation. They suggest that the suspension of belief may be the necessary prelude to faith. Miracle is a caution against equating the action of God with what is ordinary or expected. Prayerful engage-

[35] Lk 10, 29–36; 15, 11–32.

[36] Mt 11, 5–6.

ment in the strange world of miracle is at the same time an opening to the strange ways in which God may enter human life and history.

Finally, parable is open-ended; its precise meaning is often obscure. This obscurity does not arise simply because we lack the tools of historical exegesis to describe the meaning of the parable. It is intrinsic to the parable form. In order for the parable to speak to a hearer, the hearer must enter the world of the parable and become part of the drama enacted. When Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal son and the self-righteous older brother, in order to defend his fellowship with the prodigals and sinners of his society, the Pharisees are not disinterested observers. They see in the older brother the values which govern their lives, and are challenged to hear the father speak to them with the same voice of reconciliation with which he speaks to both his sons. In order for the parables to be heard today, one must not simply study them. One must imaginatively identify with the characters and allow the drama of the parables to unfold in one's life. The miracle stories of the Gospels operate in the same way. They are acted parables of God's action. They are dramatic and they invite the reader to enter into their world. Such an entry into the world of the mysteries of the Gospel has always been a vital part of christian prayer. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, through the 'application of the senses', Ignatius turns this insight into a formal method of prayer. The method first appears in the meditation on hell, where Ignatius calls on the retreatant 'to see in imagination' and to hear, smell, taste and touch the horrors of hell. When contemplating the Nativity we are told to relate to the scene 'as though present', and to serve Mary and Joseph in their needs. This method permeates the Exercises and is to be an indispensable part of engagement with the life of Christ. What Ignatius has called for is, in effect, an imaginative entry into the world of the gospel. He never prescribes in advance what the fruit of this entry is to be. The gospel mysteries are for Ignatius dramatic; they are also open-ended. Such a method of prayer, when applied to the miracles, means that we enter 'in imagination' and 'as though present', the world of miracle. It is a world which evokes awe, fear and trembling. It is also a world where not only is Jesus present in powerful word and powerful deed, but where Jesus himself is that parable, miracle and symbol pointing to one who is beyond symbol, to his Father, who by transformation of the ordinary, reveals himself as transcendent of the ordinary.