

# BELIEVE THE WORKS<sup>1</sup>

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**B**Y THE testimony of the earliest Church the miraculous is inextricably intertwined with the teaching of Jesus, to the point where it becomes readily apparent that to excise or ignore the miracle stories, especially in the gospels, is to rob the picture of Jesus of a significant dimension. A striking illustration of this was cited by the present writer in an earlier contribution to *The Way*.<sup>2</sup> Yet it may not be unhelpful to refer to it here. One of the lucan summaries of the primitive apostolic preaching (Acts 10, 34-43) describes the original gospel as the definitive communication from God, who 'sent his word to the sons of Israel and made known the good news of peace to them through Jesus Christ' (v 36). What is noteworthy, however, is that this divine 'word' is exemplified not by any teaching of Jesus, but by benefactions, specifically miracles: 'how, after God anointed him with a holy spirit and power, Jesus went about doing good and healing all those under the power of the devil' (v 38). It might be objected that this précis is highly coloured by Luke's individual theological viewpoint; and in fact, in his Gospel, Luke characterizes Jesus's entire public ministry as a campaign of exorcism and healing. 'Take note: I cast out demons and I perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I achieve perfection', says the Jesus of the Third Gospel (Lk 13, 32). However, it is interesting to see a strikingly similar conception of the gospel evinced by one of the last contributors to the New Testament (cf Heb 2, 3-4).

## *Testimony to the miraculous: the Synoptic Gospels*

This impression of the importance, for the understanding of Jesus's mission and message, attached to his miracles throughout the period of the creation of our christian-inspired literature is in fact confirmed by a glance at the gospels. Not only does Mark devote a preponderant part of his gospel to narratives dealing with the miraculous; he makes effective use of miracle-stories in his distinctive characterization of Jesus as teacher. This, for Mark the

<sup>1</sup> Cf Jn 10, 38; 14, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Vol 10 (October, 1970), pp 298-317.

most salient feature of Jesus's career, is all the more remarkable since he has not chosen (as Matthew has done) to amass the sayings of Jesus. Rather it is by his 'acts of power', as this evangelist consistently denominates Jesus's miracles, that Jesus attempts to evoke faith in the message he proclaims, 'the kingdom of God has drawn near' (Mk 1, 15). Indeed the first of these, an exorcism in the synagogue in Capernaum, is called 'a new teaching with authority' (Mk 1, 27). Moreover, two of the early miracles are presented as involving Jesus in controversy with the religious leaders: the cure of the paralytic (Mk 2, 1-12), and of the withered hand (Mk 3, 1-6).

Matthew has admittedly separated out, somewhat artificially, nine miracles in the eighth and ninth chapters of his gospel. It is however commonly agreed by commentators that this author narrates them, often in greatly abbreviated form (by contrast with Mark), only for their value as illustrations of Jesus's doctrine. The cure of the centurion's boy exemplifies the absolute need of faith in Jesus (Mt 8, 5-13), as does, in a negative way, the disciples' terror before the calming of the storm on the lake (Mt 8, 23-27). This evangelist stresses the faith of the bearers of the paralytic, while omitting the marcan evidence for it (Mt 9, 2). He dramatizes the faith of Jairus (whose name he passes over) by having him come to Jesus only when his daughter is already dead (Mt 9, 18); and Matthew alludes very briefly to the woman suffering from haemorrhages simply to stress her faith (Mt 9, 20-22). That Matthew intends to emphasize the unity of purpose he has perceived in Jesus's ministry of healing and his teaching is shown by his repetition of two almost identical summaries of Jesus's galilean ministry (Mt 4, 23; 9, 35). Further, he twice insists that the miraculous adds a necessary ingredient to the portrayal of Jesus as the deutero-isaian suffering servant of God. It will be observed that both instances are formula-citations, so distinctive a feature of this evangelist's work.<sup>3</sup>

Luke, like the other synoptics, has seen Jesus's miracles as a variant form of his teaching, since Luke is noted for his high regard for the evangelical traditions concerning Jesus's earthly history. Yet with his equally renowned creativity, this evangelist has redacted and reworded the tradition to put it at the service of his own personal picture of Jesus. Thus, as Luke recounts the exorcism of

<sup>3</sup> Cf Mt 12, 15-21, and 8, 16-17, where the author here cites the first of the Deutero-isaian servant songs (Isai 42, 1-4) in its entirety. These 'formula citations' are peculiar to Matthew. They appear at some ten places in his gospel, not on the lips of Jesus, but as his own interpretations of an event in the light of Israel's scriptures.

the man in the synagogue of Capharnaum, he has the witnesses express their amazement by the question, 'What is this word? He gives orders to the impure spirits with authority and power, and they depart!' (Lk 4, 36) 'Word' is a term of predilection for Luke: it expresses the apostolic preaching (Lk 1, 2) as well as the gospel proclaimed by Jesus (Lk 4, 32). This author in his summaries of Jesus's activity observes that 'great crowds gathered to hear and to be healed of their diseases' (Lk 5, 15; 6, 18); and he describes Jesus's commissioning of the Twelve in similar terms: 'He dispatched them to herald the kingdom of God and to heal the sick' (Lk 9, 2). A notable part of the lucan portrait of Jesus is his role as bearer of 'salvation' – a term which in Greek also means 'health'. Angels proclaim Jesus 'Saviour' at his birth (Lk 2, 11), while Simeon beholds God's 'salvation' (Lk 2, 30) in the baby he holds in his arms. Only in this gospel does John the Baptist continue the citation of Isaiah (40, 3–5) to include the promise that 'All flesh will see how God can save!' (Lk 3, 6) Luke appears to have rephrased the marcan saying about the vicarious death of the Son of Man as a 'ransom' (Mk 10, 45; see Mt 20, 28) in terms of salvation. 'The Son of Man has come to seek out and save what is lost' (Lk 19, 10). Jesus's pronouncement over the woman suffering from haemorrhaging, and the blind man, 'Your faith has saved you!' (Mk 5, 34; 10, 52), becomes almost a refrain in the lucan healing narratives (Lk 7, 50; 8, 48; 17, 19; 18, 42). The technique alerts Luke's readers to the symbolism in the miracles of healing: the restoration to 'health' signifies the gift of 'salvation' by Jesus.

Luke's innovative use of his sources can be clearly seen in his redaction of the account of Jesus's rejection at Nazareth, which this evangelist has prefixed to his account of the public ministry (Lk 4, 16–30). There Jesus announces his programme in terms of the biblical jubilee by employing a combination of Isai 61, 1–2 and Isai 58, 6. It becomes a campaign of compassion, at once a work of 'gospel' or 'heralding', and of healing and liberation. However, perhaps the most striking lucan innovation is to be seen in his proleptic use of the title, 'the Lord', – the customary New Testament designation of the risen Christ – for Jesus during the public ministry. It occurs some sixteen times between the story of the restoration to life of the widow's son at Naim (Lk 7, 13) and Jesus's dramatic confrontation of Peter in the passion narrative (Lk 22, 61). Luke has wished to indicate thereby that the actions and the teaching of the earthly Jesus can only be rightly grasped

with the new easter faith. It is as 'the Lord' that Jesus is moved to compassion for the desolate widow (Lk 7, 13), and it is to 'the Lord' that John the Baptist sends two of his disciples to ask Jesus whether he is 'the one who is come' (Lk 7, 19). 'It was in that very hour', Luke notes, 'that he had cured many people of diseases and ailments and evil spirits, and had graciously given sight to many who were blind'. Jesus's reply is couched in terms of the isaian passage employed in the Nazareth synagogue to announce Jesus's work of healing and gospelling (Isai 61, 1), the salient features for Luke of Jesus's public ministry, which after his resurrection will indicate to the believing Christian that he is indeed 'the Lord'.

*The dilemma posed by the miraculous*

The evidence already produced to illustrate the consensus of the first three gospel-writers that Jesus's miracles formed an integral part of his mission, and indeed, of his message, suggests that our attention be focussed upon the significance which the evangelists have perceived in the miraculous deeds which they attest. We have already seen to some degree how each of these writers has employed the miraculous element in the history of Jesus in presenting his very individual portrait of the central figure of christian faith. His miracles reveal Jesus as the teacher *par excellence* (Mark), the suffering servant of God (Matthew), the Saviour now risen as Lord (Luke). However, before pressing our inquiry into the principal function which the miracle-stories are made to serve in the synoptic gospels, it will be well to recall certain salient features of their authors' approach to Jesus's earthly history. Firstly, these books are essentially confessional documents: that is, testimonies of christian faith composed by believers primarily to nourish the faith of readers in whom they presuppose this same divine gift. As a consequence they make use of this common faith as the hermeneutical principle which can dispel the ambiguities inevitably surrounding the historical. To admit this confessional quality of the gospels is therefore not to put their historical character in jeopardy: it is simply to set it in proper perspective. This evangelical attestation to Jesus's miracles, inasmuch as it is the testimony of christian faith, suggests that this faith is crucial for the recognition of the presence and the purpose of the miraculous.

Secondly, it is only very rarely that any term like miracle is employed in the gospels to designate these actions of Jesus. The favoured word in all three synoptics is 'act of [divine] power' (*dynamis*). Once

(Mt 21, 15), Matthew calls Jesus's cures 'wonders' (*ta thaumasia*), while Luke reports the bystanders as declaring, 'We have seen marvels (*paradoxa*) today!' (Lk 5, 26); and in another narrative he describes the crowd as 'rejoicing over all the splendid deeds (*ta eudoxa*) performed' by Jesus (Lk 13, 17). One has the distinct impression, however, that these words, accenting the marvellous as they do, are chosen deliberately to make the reader aware that such reactions to Jesus's miracles are woefully inadequate, if not totally wide of the mark.

Thirdly, all the evangelists report at least one incident from the common tradition, which thus appears to them of paramount importance: Jesus's angry refusal to perform 'a sign from heaven' (Mk 8, 11-13, where the demand is qualified as a 'temptation') to prove the divine origin of his mission. Matthew in fact reports two such incidents (Mt 12, 38-42; 16, 1-4); and Luke presents the saying as a warning to the crowds (Lk 11, 29-32). In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus's unbelieving brothers urge him to gain publicity for 'the works you are doing' (Jn 7, 3-5), but Jesus denounces their attitude as worldliness. And in the earlier dialogue at Capharnaum, Jesus had ignored the demand of the crowd for a 'sign' (Jn 6, 30).

This last point reveals the evangelists' concern with a dilemma in which their faithful reporting of the miraculous in Jesus's public ministry has placed them. They are at once conscious of the correct significance of cures and exorcisms in Jesus's programme, and of the dangers attendant upon its misinterpretation by their readers. In the hellenistic world in which they lived, the prodigious was popularly associated with the names of wonder-workers, touted as 'divine men' in numerous legends. Jesus, the sacred writers insist, is no wonder-worker: the power he displays over disease and disability, even over inanimate nature (as in the storm on the lake), is not deployed for the purpose of exciting the audience to surprise or amazement, or to astound it. Jesus's exorcisms and cures are, like his proclamation of the imminent presence to history of God's sovereign rule, a challenge to accept Jesus in faith.

Mark, probably first of all the gospel-writers, is at pains to make this clear to his readers. Throughout the course of his book he shows Jesus remaining consistently faithful to the programme announced in his opening message in Galilee, '[God's] time has found fulfilment: God's sovereign rule has drawn near. Repent and believe in this good news!' (Mk 1, 15) Through Jesus's gospel and by his healings and exorcisms — this is Mark's understanding — the

rule of God in man's world has been inaugurated: Jesus's presence to history is the very presence of God. Luke and Matthew echo this conviction by recording a saying of which the lucan formulation is the more primitive: 'But if I by the finger of God expel the demons, then the kingdom of God has overtaken you!' (Lk 11, 20; Mt 12, 28). For Mark, as is well known, this presence is a secret, 'the mystery of the kingdom of God' (Mk 4, 11), one not to be disclosed to eyes merely astonished by Jesus's miracles, but only to those to whom 'it has been given' by God through the gift of faith. This is the celebrated marcan theme of the mystery of Jesus's divine sonship (misnamed by Wilhelm Wrede the 'messianic secret'). It is this theological insight which enables the reader of Mark to make sense of Jesus's repeatedly fruitless attempts to preserve his anonymity, forbidding not only the demons but the human beings he has healed to disclose his identity.

What purpose has Mark seen in the miracles of Jesus? They are the opening assault upon the evil that Jesus finds already present in history, where he comes to initiate the reign of God. He carries out his God-given mission by 'tying up the strong one' (Mk 3, 27), whom Paul (1 Cor 2, 8) and John (Jn 12, 31) have dubbed 'the prince of this world'. On the marcan view all Jesus's 'acts of power' are in a sense exorcisms, which explains the presence of exorcism-vocabulary in the healing narratives (Mk 1, 43; 3, 5; 9, 25), and even in the stilling of the storm (Mk 4, 39). For this evangelist, then, the miracles of the public ministry are not regarded as 'proving' that Jesus is Son of God (for that is a well-guarded secret in this gospel): they are 'acts of power' directed to the realization in history of God's sovereignty, involving the overthrow of Satan.

If Matthew does not explicitly present Jesus's miracles as an attack upon the satanic hold on mankind, he implies as much by interpreting them as the fulfilment of various isaian prophecies. 'The people living in darkness have beheld a great light, and over the dwellers in the land overshadowed by death, light has arisen' (Mt 4, 16; see Isai 9, 2). Luke however has expressly endorsed the marcan view in his story of the cure of the arthritic woman; 'This daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has held in bondage these past eighteen years' (Lk 13, 16); and in Jesus's reaction to the triumphant report of the cures worked by the seventy-two disciples, 'I saw Satan falling like lightning from heaven' (Lk 13, 16). This evangelist moreover warns his readers against the superficial view that the advent of God's reign is in any way demonstrable; hence

his cures are not to be taken as proof of its arrival (Lk 17, 20-21).

Even the foregoing rapid and necessarily lacunary review of the synoptic testimony to Jesus's miracles reveals these authors' sensitivity to the dilemma posed by the miraculous element in his ministry. These evangelists feel obliged to attest its presence as an essential facet of Jesus's mission; yet they are at pains to avoid any misunderstanding of Jesus as a mere wonder-worker.

It may be helpful to recall an analogous dilemma in which the Church of the nineteenth century found herself at that moment of self-awareness known as the first Vatican Council. The upheaval in philosophical and religious attitudes associated (both as cause and effect) with the French Revolution in Europe provoked two widely divergent reactions from some catholic theologians. These men appear to have sensed the threat which 'the modern mind', child of the revolution, posed to the time-honoured, classical, static approach to reality, which over long centuries had dominated clerical thinking and been canonized as the uniquely orthodox expression of the Church's doctrines. One riposte came from certain reactionary thinkers who became known as fideists or traditionalists. They tended to deny the capacity of the human mind to reach certitude, particularly in religious matters, unless assisted by some kind of divine revelation. At the other end of the theological spectrum stood rationalists like the german catholic theologian, George Hermes, who insisted upon subjecting faith to the scrutiny of reason as its sole support. Since these two diametrically opposed ideologies entertained erroneous views on miracles, Vatican I through its Constitution on Faith endeavoured to chart a sure course for the believer by its discussion of the relationship of faith to reason. The Council anathematized the rationalists' contention that 'no miracles are possible, and hence all such narratives, even though contained in sacred scripture, are to be categorized as fables or myths'. Yet in the same canon, in order to parry the undue pessimism of traditionalism or fideism, the synod championed the capability of the human mind to attain certitude in religious matters. It condemned the opinion that 'miracles could never be known with certainty, nor could the divine origin of the christian religion be duly demonstrated (*rite probari*) by them'.<sup>4</sup> Yet one senses the fathers' awareness of the dilemma created by the

<sup>4</sup> For the latin text see Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (editio xxxiii, Romae, 1965), 3034.

expression 'duly demonstrated', for the canon immediately following denounces the rationalist Hermes's view that 'the assent of christian faith is not free, but issues of necessity from arguments of human reason'.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, it is in the light of this dilemma that we must understand the Council's earlier declaration that 'miracles and prophecies . . . are most certain signs (*signa sunt certissima*) and proportionate to the understanding of all men'. In short, while the miraculous element in Jesus's earthly ministry, for instance, offers ample, reliable evidence to the human mind so that the assent of faith is not contrary to reason, still the evidence is not of such a nature as to destroy the freedom of assent (thereby making the act of faith the conclusion of a syllogism). This somewhat abstruse discussion, for which an apology is made, will be seen to be useful for the correct understanding of the two texts in the Fourth Gospel which provide a title for this study (Jn 10, 38; 14, 11).

*Twofold designation of Jesus's miracles in the Fourth Gospel*

When we turn to the Fourth Gospel we discover an interesting and puzzling phenomenon. There the miracles of Jesus are designated as 'signs' and as 'works', while the familiar synoptic term 'act of power' (*dynamis*) does not even occur, in any sense, in the entire book. 'Works' denominates the miraculous but twice in the earlier gospels: Matthew speaks of 'the works of the Messiah' (Mt 11, 2); Luke describes Jesus as 'a prophet mighty in work and word' (Lk 24, 19). The use of 'sign' for miracle is employed by the synoptics only in the incident already cited, where Jesus rejects the demand to perform 'a sign from heaven' as proof of his claims (Mk 8, 11-13; Mt 16, 1-4; Lk 11, 29-32). In addition, Matthew speaks cryptically of Jesus's resurrection as 'the sign of Jonah the prophet' (Mt 12, 38-42). As regards the innovative usage of the fourth evangelist, two questions may be asked: why does John not use his predecessors' term 'act of power', and why does he employ both 'sign' and 'work' for the miracles of Jesus?

The answer to the first question lies in the creative re-vamping by the fourth evangelist of the traditional view of Jesus's earthly mission. In the earlier Gospels, Jesus proclaims the proximate establishment in history of 'the kingdom of God', already become inchoatively a reality in his preaching, his miracles, and his presence to men. In this perspective the miracles are aptly called 'acts

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, no 3035.



of power', negatively inasmuch as they are the initial assault upon Satan's hold upon mankind, positively insofar as they vindicate God's sovereignty by challenging men to faith in the definitive offer of salvation in the person and mission of Jesus of Nazareth. Where the synoptic Jesus almost never speaks of himself (even of his own place in the Kingdom of God), the johannine Jesus speaks at length about himself through profound revelation-discourses and by means of a series of symbolic statements. 'I am the living bread' (Jn 6, 51), 'the light of the world' (Jn 8, 12), 'the gate' (Jn 10, 9), 'the ideal shepherd' (Jn 10, 11), 'the resurrection and the life' (Jn 11, 25), 'the way, that is, the truth and the life' (Jn 14, 6), 'the genuine vine' (Jn 15, 1). Since by its nature the symbol is ambivalent, it would seem that this evangelist has chosen this means to present Jesus to his readers, not so much to convey information about him, as to challenge to reflection and ultimately to accept him in faith through becoming receptive to a totally new (and largely unknown) religious experience. It has been observed that the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel, in his virulent attack upon 'the Jews' (the religious establishment), appears to be something less than fair by indicting them for want of faith in himself, since, until the Spirit is given by the exalted Lord, real faith was impossible. And indeed, as late as the Last Supper, Jesus's own disciples, Peter, Thomas, Philip, Jude, show that they had not yet attained such genuine belief in their master. The point which the evangelist wishes his reader to grasp, however, is that 'the Jews' have already closed themselves to the *possibility* of believing in Jesus. They are quite without the openness displayed by the disciples (cf Jn 8, 23.37.43).

As for the kingdom of God, the johannine Jesus nowhere proclaims its coming into history. Rather, it is Jesus as 'the Word' who descends from above (Jn 3, 13) to 'become interpreter of the God no man has ever seen' (Jn 1, 18). Jesus has come to lead men back into God's kingdom by a rebirth (Jn 3, 5) 'from water and spirit'. One receives the distinct impression, surprising in a gospel that insists so strongly upon the 'realized' aspect of eschatology, that for John the kingdom of God remains completely in the world above. Hence he never views Jesus's miracles as 'acts of power' which effectively inaugurate the kingdom here below.

To answer our second question – why does John employ both 'sign' and 'work' to denote Jesus's miracles? – we shall begin by reviewing some of the explanations offered by the commentators on the Fourth Gospel. A distinction is sometimes made on the

grounds that the evangelist speaks of 'signs', while Jesus himself uses 'works'. While this is true as a broad generalization, there are some notable exceptions to be recalled. The crowd in Capharnaum, which by and large displays no faith in Jesus, asks, 'What are we to do that we may work the works of God?' (Jn 6, 28) Jesus's unbelieving brothers in Galilee tell him, 'You should leave this place and go up to Judaea, in order that even your disciples may see your works, which you are performing' (Jn 7, 3). The evangelist insinuates by employing the phrase '*your* works' what he expressly states in the sequel. 'Not even his brothers were putting any faith in him' (Jn 7, 5). For throughout the gospel Jesus repeatedly insists that his 'works' are really the works of his Father (Jn 5, 20, 36; 9, 3-4; 10, 25. 32. 37; 14, 10); the exceptions are 7, 21 and 15, 24.

However, from the general context of the gospel the reader can grasp that in reality Jesus's 'works' remain the actions of the Father. 'The Son can do nothing on his own except what he sees the Father doing' (Jn 5, 19); 'I can do nothing on my own' (Jn 5, 30); 'For the the Father loves the Son and shows him all his works' (Jn 5, 20). To his disciples Jesus can say, 'Do you not believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? I am not the source of the words I speak to you: it is the Father who dwells in me doing his own works' (Jn 14, 10). These texts illustrate a theme characteristic of this gospel, which I have elsewhere called that of 'the poverty of the Son'. Everything Jesus says, all he does, indeed everything he *is*, are actually the words, actions, the being of the Father. Jesus is truly 'the Word' of the unseen God, the perfect expression through a human life of his Father.

It may be useful here to ask why our evangelist also calls Jesus's miracles 'signs'. It is often said that while Jesus calls his miracles 'works', the evangelist refers to them as 'signs'. Such a distinction becomes obviously artificial, once it is recalled that the sayings put in the mouth of Jesus in this gospel are no less John's than the other statements which the evangelist makes *in propria persona*. Both 'works' and 'signs' are characteristic of johannine usage; hence the real question is, why does John employ this double terminology? Secondly, can it be that, granted 'work(s)' is extended to other than the miraculous actions of Jesus, 'sign' is applied only for miracles? 'Work' indeed appears twice as a synonym for Jesus's entire mission in this world. 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to carry out his work' (Jn 4, 34). In his final prayer to

the Father, Jesus declares, 'I have glorified you upon earth by carrying out the work you have given me to do' (Jn 17, 4). When John speaks of the Father as 'working', he thinks of God's providential care of his creation, of which the most important is his self-communication, by drawing men to faith in Jesus and assisting them to 'live the truth'. Jesus's rejoinder to the Jews' criticism of him for curing a cripple on a sabbath is that 'My Father is at work until now, and I myself am at work' (Jn 5, 17). The rabbinical interpretation of Gen 2, 2, where God is said to have rested after his creation of the universe, conceded that the divine work of conservation had necessarily to continue. John is also well aware that to believe in Jesus is impossible without the initiative of the Father. 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him' (Jn 6, 44. 65). 'This is the work of God – that you may believe in the one he has sent' (Jn 6, 29). Moreover, the very possibility of 'living the truth' is, chiefly, not due to man's but to God's work: 'The person who lives the truth comes to the light, in order that his works may be manifested as having been worked by God' (Jn 3, 21). Jesus explains the reason for the terrible affliction of the man born blind by telling the disciples, 'It was that the works of God might be manifested in him' (9, 3). If the miraculous gift of sight is one of these 'works', the most significant 'work' is the gift of faith in Jesus as the Son of Man (Jn 9, 35–38). Thus it becomes clear that for John the 'works' of Jesus include more than acts of healing; in fact, his entire earthly mission is his 'work' as commissioned by the Father. It is this relationship to the Father, the 'God no man has ever seen', which dominates this peculiarly johannine concept. This is shown by John's ranking of Jesus's 'works' as the most valued testimony to the authentic character of Jesus's mission: it is the testimony of the Father himself (Jn 5, 36). For our evangelist, Jesus's words as well as his actions are to be included among the Father's 'works', as we learn from the Last Supper discourse. 'Do you not believe', Jesus says to Philip, 'that I am in union with the Father and the Father is in union with me? The words which I am speaking to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who abides in me is doing his own works' (Jn 14, 10). Moreover, in the same context Jesus promises that the believer will in the future carry on his 'works'. 'Amen, amen, I tell you, the person believing me will himself do the very works I am doing; indeed, even greater than these will he do, because I am going home to the Father' (Jn 14, 12). It is Jesus's return to God through his

death and resurrection which will enable the Christian to become one with the exalted Lord through faith, to be the agent, like Jesus himself, of the Father's 'works'.

By contrast 'sign' is predicated exclusively in the Fourth Gospel of certain actions of Jesus; even John the Baptist 'did no sign' (Jn 10, 4). Here two questions must be raised, over which commentators are in disagreement. Does the evangelist limit the use of this term to Jesus's actions during his public ministry, or are the post-resurrection manifestations of himself also 'signs' performed by the glorified Lord? Certainly the remark which stands as conclusion to the carefully selected narratives of Jesus's risen life would appear to indicate that these confrontations with his disciples are meant to be taken as 'signs': 'Indeed, many other signs also Jesus performed in the presence of the disciples . . .' (Jn 20, 30). If this view be correct, we are given an important insight into the meaning of 'sign', once it is recalled that these three appearances to Mary Magdalene and to the disciples are presented as recognition scenes, intended to explain the genesis of christian faith in these first followers of Jesus. Only when Magdalene is given the gift of faith by Jesus, who calls her by name, does she really know who he is. The disciples, huddled together fearfully behind locked doors, recognize Jesus as their risen Lord through the marks of his Passion: 'Upon saying this, he showed them his hands and his side; the disciples thereupon rejoiced at seeing the Lord' (Jn 20, 20). A week later Thomas articulates his newly bestowed christian faith with the words, 'My Lord and my God!' (Jn 20, 28), after he has been bidden to touch the wounds that remain in the hands and side of the glorified Jesus. The evangelist seems to imply that the 'sign' properly understood bears an essential relation to christian faith.

How does John intend the reader to understand the 'signs' of Jesus during his public ministry? Many commentators insist that only Jesus's miracles can qualify as 'signs'. And indeed a number of the actions of Jesus so designated are miracles: the two at Cana (Jn 2, 11; 4, 54), the feeding of the crowd (Jn 6, 14), the cure of the man born blind (Jn 9, 16), and the raising of Lazarus (Jn 12, 18). Yet there are indications that for John 'sign' is not simply a surrogate for the miraculous. The cure of the man by the pool is never so denominated, although Jesus refers to it as 'a work' (Jn 7, 21). On the other hand, Jesus's symbolic action in the Temple area is apparently regarded as a 'sign'. This view admittedly hinges on how one understands the difficult question put by the Jews to

Jesus (Jn 2, 18) on this occasion. Most modern versions interpolate the word 'authority' into the text, although it is not present in the Greek. Thus the New English Bible renders, 'What sign can you show us as authority for your action?' Greater fidelity to the original requires it be rendered, 'What sign are you showing us by doing these things?' Moreover, this accords better with the sense of the entire episode presented through Jesus's cryptic reply: 'Destroy this sanctuary, and within three days I will raise it up' (Jn 2, 19); by which John says 'he was speaking about the sanctuary of his body' (Jn 2, 21). And John adds that it was only through 'remembering' after Jesus's resurrection, that is, after they had received christian faith, that the disciples found faith 'in the scripture and in the word Jesus had uttered' (Jn 2, 22). By 'remembering' – a term the evangelist employs in connection with another symbolic action, Jesus's messianic entry into Jerusalem (Jn 12, 16) – John means the insight given the first disciples through the action of the Paraclete, gift of the risen Jesus: 'He will teach you everything, and *make you remember* all I have told you' (Jn 14, 26). There is a third symbolic action, the foot-washing, substituted for the narrative of institution of the Eucharist and presented as a prophecy in action of Jesus's death as the suffering Servant (as also of the Eucharist), whose meaning for the moment is concealed from Peter. He will only grasp its significance 'after these things' (Jn 13, 7); that is, after Jesus's resurrection when he receives the easter faith.

Whether or not one agrees that for the evangelist such symbolic actions might be properly designated as 'signs', these narratives reveal John's conviction that the actions of the historical Jesus were ambiguous; their sign-value could only become evident to the eyes of post-resurrection faith. This, I venture to suggest, is the purpose behind the johannine usage of 'sign', as applied to Jesus's miracles. They are indeed pointers to the mystery surrounding Jesus throughout his earthly and mortal life; but the ambiguity that necessarily attends all historical events also compassed the miraculous element in Jesus's public ministry. Like those other symbols employed as self-designations by the johannine Jesus, his miracles disclose their true meaning as the Father's 'works', effected by Jesus as part of his mission, once the Paraclete, sent by the Father and the exalted Jesus, gives genuine faith to the disciples. Before Jesus's glorification, his actions, miraculous or symbolic, like his words, were 'signs' (in a true, but only inchoative sense) for the disciples, not for the Jews, since the former maintained an attitude of openness to a

totally unknown religious experience, which the Spirit alone would bring them once Jesus was glorified. Only in the post-resurrection period would the 'signs' be comprehended as the Father's 'works'.

*'Believe the works'*

It remains to discuss briefly the meaning of two texts in the Fourth Gospel, which were employed in the manuals of apologetics of a bygone age as a demonstration from scripture that Jesus's divinity was 'proved' by his miracles.

The first is a remark of Jesus to the Jews during the feast of Hannukah, when the question of his messianic identity is raised. 'If you are the Messiah, tell us so openly' (Jn 10, 24). Jesus replies, 'I have told you, yet you do not believe. The works I am doing in my Father's name bear testimony to me' (Jn 10, 25). As has been seen, 'works' (in contrast with 'signs') include the divine offer of faith in Jesus, which alone is capable of removing the historical ambiguity enshrouding all the actions, miraculous or otherwise, as well as the words of the Jesus of the public ministry. As testimony these 'works' respect human freedom; yet they appear to be a more pressing, even clearer invitation than the 'signs'. Hence refusal to accept this testimony of the Father to Jesus, who is 'one' with him (Jn 10, 30), carries a far heavier penalty than not believing in 'signs' (see Jn 12, 27-40). For it results in the sin of unfaith, which is 'the sin of the world' (Jn 1, 29); and leaves the person who thereby closes himself to Jesus and his message filled with hatred for Jesus and for God himself (cf Jn 15, 24).

One of the principal concerns of the fourth evangelist, who belongs to a christian Church that is in open dialogue with the local synagogue, is how a Jew can be brought to faith in Jesus as the Son of God. John is aware that these members of God's own people have the traditional faith of Israel, as did Jesus's own disciples during his earthly life. At the Last Supper Jesus will say to his own, 'You believe in God: you must believe also in me' (Jn 14, 1). If the Jews find it difficult to accept Jesus, their own faith should enable them to receive the testimony of the God of Israel to his works, a crucial step towards finding true faith in Jesus himself (Jn 10, 37. 38).

At the Last Supper Jesus addresses himself in similar fashion to his disciples (Jn 14, 10-11). Here, as in the debate with the Jews, the premise is the same: the disciples have genuine faith in God. Jesus makes the same appeal to both groups; yet with totally different results. Why? Because his adversaries have closed them-

selves to the efflorescence of the ancient faith into the new experience (as yet as unknown to the disciples as to the Jews) of that profound personal relationship with Jesus, which for John is the very essence of christian faith. There is no question of being won over to Jesus by an apologetic argument (faith is never the conclusion of a syllogism), but through willingness to accept God's definitive invitation to salvation in Jesus.

It would appear that by 'works', which include the miraculous actions of Jesus as well as his words, John wishes to indicate the action of the Father, drawing all believers to Jesus. When John speaks of Jesus's 'signs', he would seem to denote Jesus's miracles (perhaps also his symbolic actions) in their historical ambiguity. As 'signs' they often lead to a superficial acceptance of Jesus which is not genuine faith (Jn 2, 23-24), even though they can move an honest inquirer like Nicodemus to admit, 'Rabbi, we know you have come as a teacher from God; for no one can do these signs which you are doing, unless God be with him' (Jn 3, 2). Still, the ensuing dialogue reveals how far Nicodemus actually is from 'seeing the kingdom of God' (Jn 3, 3). The evangelist can of course describe the disciples' response to the first of Jesus's 'signs' at Cana by saying, 'his disciples believed in him' (Jn 2, 11); for this evangelist anticipates what that response eventually became after the giving of the Spirit by the risen Jesus.

The earthly mission of the historical Jesus – his words, his actions, even his mission – did, despite their historical ambivalence, constitute an efficacious summons to his contemporaries to faith in himself. Under this aspect Jesus's mission is called the 'work' commissioned by the Father, and his words and miracles are 'the works' of the God of Israel, summoning his people to belief in, to love of, his only Son Jesus. Hence John can issue, through the words of Jesus, the call to 'believe the works': he never says, 'Believe the signs'.

The synoptic evangelists correctly assessed the miraculous element in Jesus's ministry as an expression of his teaching; hence they tried to acquaint their readers with the inner meaning of Jesus's miracles and their relation to faith. John has employed a twofold terminology for these miracles, presenting them in their historical facticity as only symbols or 'signs' of an invisible reality, the divine invitation to believe in Jesus. Viewed in this fashion, they are designated as 'works', like all those ancient saving acts of God within the history of Israel.