

The Reality Of Miracles

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[0 : 00] We go towards Jerusalem, and Jesus stopped everybody and had the men brought to him, and he reached out and touched their eyes and commanded that they be given their sight.

And they were seeing, they were given the gift of sight and followed him as his disciple. So in that fairly simple and innocuous way, Jesus presents to us in this little story the fact of a miracle, a miracle in which two men received their sight.

Now, I want you to look at that miracle. I want you to look at it because of... I don't know if you'll be offended if I say this, but this parish is full of miracles that haven't happened yet, and we need a lot of them to happen.

And so that the possibility of a miracle is a possibility I want to confront you with this morning, that this group were confronted with a miracle, and I think we need in some way to relate ourselves to the possibility of miracles occurring right here.

So this is just to look at the miracle. Now, first, if you look at the text itself, it's a peculiar place for this story to come.

[1 : 25] At the end of the chapter and in between some teaching for the disciples and in between the story, which will begin with chapter 21, of the Palm Sunday and the Last Supper.

So here this little piece of scripture is fitted in there. And this is what New Testament scholars call a pericope, which is a lovely name, and it's like every other profession.

They like to have words that nobody outside the profession will understand. But what a pericope is, is it's... They think that what happened is somebody took this story and cut it out with a pair of scissors, and pericope means they cut it out.

And then they pasted it in here, even though it didn't really fit in this part of the story. Because there's another very similar story that occurs early in the Gospel of Matthew.

But the corroborating fact is that there are parallel stories in Mark and Luke. So that in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there are these parallel stories. They are all different in detail from one another.

[2 : 35] And that's interesting, too, and difficult for people to understand, because they don't know how that happened. And yet, they all basically corroborate the same fact, that it did take place in Jericho, that there was one blind man at least, though Matthew uses two blind men, and people don't know why he did.

In one Gospel, his name is given as Bartimaeus, but it's not given in the Gospel of Matthew. And that the crowd was stopped, and that the crowd was offended.

In one, it records that he healed them by a word, and in another, it records that he healed them by a word, and touching them. And in one, it says, don't go and tell anybody, and they went and told everybody.

In this, they simply turned in and followed with the crowd that was going through Jericho towards Jerusalem. So that there's a lot of different details.

And you can say, if you want, that there's a textual problem. That's what New Testament scholars like to say as to why this story is here and what it represents.

[3 : 50] But that's the kind of background in the text of the New Testament. It's corroborated by three Gospels. It's one of a series of stories in connection with that in which the blind receive their sight, including John chapter 9, which is the long story of the man who was born blind.

The healing of the blind is one of the particular marks of the Messiah who would come, so that this had a special significance as a type of miracle that the people of Israel expected would be the mark of the Messiah.

And all that is the kind of background on which the story that we have at the end of Matthew chapter 20 is built. So that's the textual background.

Now, the second thing I want you to think about is the historical reality of it. The New Testament is not a book of fairy stories.

I think I told you one morning about the old fellow from one of the fishing villages in Newfoundland who had been brought up in the Anglican Church. And when you're brought up in the Anglican Church in Newfoundland, you're brought up properly.

[5 : 09] And you know a whole lot about the Bible and about the catechism because all the schools in Newfoundland are church schools. They were when he was a boy.

And it was a great disappointment to him when he grew up to find that Jerusalem was, in fact, a place you could get to by air in this 20th century.

He thought it was just a lovely story about something that had never existed that never was. But the New Testament is essentially an historical document.

And the things that it states, it states as a matter of history. Now, when Jesus tells a story like the parable of the prodigal son or the Good Samaritan, that is told as a story to illustrate a point.

But the narrative sections of the gospel are recording historical facts. So you have the textual evidence of this miracle taking place, and you have the contextual evidence that this took place in history.

[6 : 22] This is something that happened. Just like you burnt the bacon in the frying pan yesterday morning, that's now a part of history. And this story is also a part of history.

It's something that happened. And the fact is that there is a real city of Jericho. They know where it happened. They know approximately when it happened.

And they have the evidence from three sources in the three different Gospels. that it happened. So it's regarded as an historical fact. The problem then is, what do you do with a miracle in terms of faith?

Well, for those who have faith in Jesus Christ, then this story is told to confirm their faith, to strengthen their faith.

For those who haven't got faith, a story of a miracle like this must be used in order to provoke faith.

[7 : 27] Because how can they deny that it happened? You see, there are certain ways by which we test the validity of historical events.

and this same process can be used to check the historicity of this event. And it confirms the faith of believers and provokes the lack of faith in unbelievers.

Then you move into the realm of philosophy. And I think that here you have to deal with the thing that what happens in our age is that religion is regarded as something you can believe if you want to believe.

And you don't have to believe it if you don't want to believe it. Well, philosophically, that's impossible. It may be very convenient for you to believe or not to believe according to your whim. but philosophically, what you're playing with is the possibility that there isn't such a thing as truth. That the only possibility of truth is that you believe in it.

[8 : 35] And it's only true because you believe in it. And that way, you undermine the possibility of there being anything true about anything. Philosophically, the basis of this story is that there is such a thing as truth.

And if you deny it, you undermine that possibility. You can challenge it and test it in all the ways that you want to. There's no law against that.

But ultimately, you have to come down to the hard fact that it is either a deliberate lie or else it's true. you can't soften the edges by saying, well, it's all right if you want to believe in it and it's all right if you don't want to believe in it.

You have to come down to the hard fact that either it's a lie deliberately perpetrated to convince the gullible or else it is the truth.

And if you're interested in truth, you have to come to terms with it. So that's what happens when we are presented with the philosophical background of a miracle.

[9 : 47] Then there's the problem of nature. The difficulty with miracles is that they don't go according to the laws of nature. You might see in the garden at the back some lovely, lovely roses.

But those roses are there because there are certain laws of nature. And by crop breeding certain types of plants we have developed magnificent roses.

And it's all done according to certain laws. But when somebody comes along and touches the eyes of a blind man so that he sees, then we don't understand the law of nature that's involved in that.

Because obviously it doesn't happen every time somebody goes and touches a blind man's eye. And so what are you going to do with that problem? That it contravenes the laws of nature. Well, what you have to understand is that there is behind this miracle there is another miracle. [10:58] miracle. And I think this is the only way that you can understand it. That every miracle in the New Testament is in a sense derived from a kind of central miracle which is at the heart of the New Testament.

And the central miracle is that God, the creator of the universe, became a man. that the one who had created the universe came into his universe in the person of Jesus Christ.

The central miracle then is the incarnation. That Jesus is the son of God. That he is the image of God.

That he is the God man. And that's the central miracle. So that every miracle inevitably forces you back to the question of who is Jesus Christ?

Because only in the answer to that do you find the answer of how it's possible that he can touch the eyes of the blind and command that he sees. Because if he is who the New Testament claims he is, then he is the Lord of nature.

[12:25] He is the God of nature. He is not just in the world but he is the God who created the world. And so it's possible that he can order things in nature in a way that we who are part of nature can't.

And you come down to this basis for miracles. And that is that if Jesus is who he claims to be in the New Testament the strange thing would be if miracles didn't happen.

Because he is the one who can still the storm give sight to the blind heal the lame give hearing to the deaf. Because he is the God of nature who has become man.

And that's why you see central to our whole confession of faith is who you believe Jesus Christ is. There is a sense in which it can be said that if he is who he says he is then this isn't a miracle at all. It's simply a manifestation of his power as the one who created and sustains the universe. And that's really the basis of miracle throughout the whole of the New Testament.

[13:57] Well what happens to us then? You know that one of the big pipeline debates at the moment is are the environmental studies.

What's going to happen if you bring oil barges down the west coast and one of them springs a leak? What's it going to do to the environment? Well we're worried about creating an environment in which tragedies can happen like that and what a tragedy it would be.

Well I think what we're called upon to do as the church of Jesus Christ is to create an environment in which miracles can take place.

The problem I think that we have at the moment is that we have created an environment in which miracles cannot take place. I read a story in a missionary magazine and it struck me as being very helpful to us who live in the western world.

Described a man who went to the hospital and this was down in South America and discovered that he had a very serious but operable condition.

[15:19] In other words if he had the money they could operate on him. He was a peasant he had no money whatever and there was no possibility of him raising all the money that would be required to heal his disease.

And as he walked back through the city knowing that he had what was because of the lack of an operation a terminal condition he saw a sign talking about a church service at which healing would take place.

Now if you were him would you go to that service or not? Well if you were healthy and well and right minded and living in the west you would say nonsense.

that couldn't possibly happen but he went to the service. Now I'm not going to tell you what happened because I don't know but all I wanted to show you was the possibility of it.

Now you see what we've done in our scientific world is to take and we've been enormously successful at this to take every human condition whether it's health or nourishment food or shelter or education whatever it is and we have poured millions of dollars into the development of hospitals and schools and all sorts of social service agencies to deal with the problems of mankind.

[16:56] and we give people university degrees in order to classify these problems, in order to look at them, in order to see how they can best be treated.

And as you know hospitals and schools have become very impersonal places. They've become extremely costly places. And they are in fact not able to provide the miracles that need to happen. The miracles of healing and education, all the miracles that need to happen in our society. And I think that one of the responsibilities that we have as a church is to create a climate in which miracles can happen.

Not in order to help out with the British Columbia hospital insurance or something like that in particular, but because many of the needs of man are such that only the activity of the grace of God can meet those needs.

And we don't pray because we feel that most of the problems we have, we have technical answers for it, so why would you bother to pray? Don't pray, pay your medical insurance.

[18 : 29] And this is the way our world works. And we're discovering that our world is becoming a very impersonal world.

This comes out particularly strongly in the conference I told you about where they were dealing with terminally ill patients at the Royal Victoria Hospital. And they found out that once a patient had gone past the point where the hospital could offer them anything in terms of healing, the hospital virtually forgot about them and left them to die.

And somebody had to move in there with a sense of the miracle of God being able to meet people in extremity and to try and change that whole thing around.

And we have to be able to move into our world and convince people that miracles are not something which belonged to long ago and far away.

That there are a lot of miracles that need to happen in our midst. And these are going to happen because of the grace of God being poured upon us through God's Holy Spirit.

[19 : 43] And I think that our responsibility as a community is to create a climate where miracles can take place.

I know that miracles tend to be unpredictable and arbitrary. But the reality of the ultimate miracle that God became man in Jesus Christ and confronts us is the miracle around which the whole of the church is built.

And if he is who he claims to be, then we are less than we're meant to be if we don't expect miracles to take place in people's lives.

If we're not praying towards that, if we're not working towards that. And finally, let me tell you this. The two men on whom this miracle was performed were blind.

And it may well be that we too are blind. Blind to what God is doing and purposes to do in our midst.

[20 : 57] service. And it would not be inappropriate in this service this morning if we were to make it our prayer that our eyes might be open to what God can do and what God purposes to do in our own lives and in our life together as a community of his people.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. We're going to sing hymn number 563.

563. We're going to go.

we're going to go.

We're going to go. We're going to Thank you.

[22 : 39] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[25 : 23] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. In our prayers this morning, can we be particularly mindful of the constitutional crisis in our country?

That men in positions of responsibility may be given not just earthly wisdom, but may be given heavenly wisdom in making decisions which will very much affect us as a country through all the years ahead.

We pray for our diocese, for our bishop, in this centennial year that is about to begin.

There might be a revival and renewal of the faith of Christ throughout our diocese.

[26 : 51] We pray for renewal and revival. We must allow before God that that could begin with each one of us. Our hearts must be open to that possibility.

Will you pray for the family of H. Clifford Ketchison, whose memorial service will be here this week, that his family may be very much comforted and may be given great assurance in the knowledge of Christ's resurrection.

Would you pray for those who are sick in our parish, that God might by his Holy Spirit visit them, relieve them, and give them a sense of his glory.

Pray with you for all the organizations of our parish, the guilds, the scout and cub troops, guides and brownies, for our Monday church club and those that staff it, for the Bible study groups in the parish, for the servers in the choir.

May we may see amongst us all the miracle of renewal in our faith in Christ, in our longing to serve and worship him.

[28 : 32] May we may see amongst us all the people of our parish, the church in our church, and the church in our church in our church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace.

Where it is corrupt, purify it. Where it is in error, direct it. Where anything is amiss, reform it.

Where it is right, strengthen and confirm it. Where it is in want, furnish it. Where it is divided and rent asunder, make it whole again.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Amen.