

13<sup>th</sup> after Trinity, 2009      Humility and Miracles

Isaiah 35, 4-7a; James 2, 1-10; 14-17; Mark 7, 24-37

What is a miracle? I wonder if you have ever seen one? Today, we might have all kinds of different views as to what might constitute a miracle, perhaps depending on what you or I were lacking or needed. I wouldn't consider winning the lottery to come into this classification, but being relieved of interminable pain – well, probably yes. But one man did do such things. The blind were made to see; the deaf made to hear; the lame made to walk; just as if a spring of cleansing water had washed away what was bad and had gone wrong. Do you know anybody who could do that? Could we write a computer programme to make it happen? That might be a miracle in itself. But today alas, no amount of money and no amount of surgeon's skill can guarantee any of those miracles which took away the breath of those who first witnessed them.

So, what can bring about a miracle, and if we are prepared, by the time I have finished speaking, will you experience a rather different sort of miracle to the one you might be imagining now? And might this wondrous event be not outside and visible but rather inside us and invisible?

The woman from Syro-Phoenicia had her own miracle granted, and, wonderful to relate, at a distance before she even got home. It is the first example of a miracle by remote control. How many of us have a wife or husband or brother or sister or child whom medical science cannot help at the moment? What would it feel like to come home after a long day and find them well and completely healed, against all expectations?

Both the story of the woman with the sick child and the one about the deaf and dumb man teach us about the universality of Jesus's power. Both of people emerged from the crowd in order to declare to us, the reader, that Jesus is not just a miracle worker, but a person in whom God is encountered.

James's letter talks about the poor and the rich – but both may inherit the kingdom – the poor who are seen as poor by others in society, and also the rich – the rich in faith. In James' time both of those classes of people were in relatively small numbers – and today, well is it still the same? You probably already know the answer.

St Mark is telling us about Jesus operating in a mostly Gentile area, and his message is that his extraordinary powers were not reserved exclusively for the Jews. Those who saw the deaf man hear again were astonished, and even as non-Jews they saw the fulfilment of the messianic prophecies and couldn't wait to rush out and tell the world about it. (That's good advertising.)

After the messy and private spitting on the man (actually quite a normal action in the ancient world) there was an assumption that something extraordinary was about to happen – an action which revealed Jesus' powerful and stunning ministry. He had no wish for publicity or to be sensational, but now nothing could stop the people proclaiming him from the rooftops. So the onlookers were amazed, but what about the man himself who regained his hearing? "Be opened" he was told; and then for the first time he heard Jesus speaking in his native tongue – and so would all peoples for the rest of time.

Today all kinds of people are craving a miracle, but they seem to be in desperately short supply. The young people I see at St Martin's Hospital each week who have no money, no family, no home and no hope clearly need something to get them going again. Is their solution going to come from heaven or from earth? From divine or human help? Social services can help to a point, but afterwards a lot of human love is going to be needed. It seems to me that there is much more scope for miracles to come from a human agency, even if undergirded by some divine encouragement.

Jesus made an extraordinary response to the woman from Syro-Phoenicia. Let's not forget that she wasn't a Christian. She would have believed in various Gods, not just the one. In Matthew's gospel she is described as a Canaanite, the ancient enemy of the Jewish people. I wonder if you sensed something of the dramatic tension and poignancy when you read this little episode? The stress is not on the healing of her daughter, but on the dialogue with Jesus, and how he rebuffs her, almost in an insulting way. But Jesus knows what his priorities are – first he has to feed his own children, the Gentiles can come later – and so she as a non-Jew is referred to her a dog.

But her reaction is exemplary. She is not offended to be rejected as one of Jesus' children. But was Jesus really referring to the wild and scavenging dogs in the street? No, but surely to the household pets in the backyard waiting to be fed scraps from the table. But Jesus WAS creating a sense of priorities – people must be fed before animals, the dogs outside can

look after themselves, the children inside cannot. The divine mission was to look after his own people, and then to extend the hand of love to other nations.

But this woman's argument was a clever one, and she saw the divinely ordained division between the Jews and the Gentiles. And she was prepared to stoop for the crumbs she didn't deserve. She appealed to Jesus' mercy, not to his justice. If she had been proud, she would have sought justice, but no, she was humble, and was rewarded with mercy. Jesus was impressed, and gave her a miracle. But more than this, she was persistent, and she was shrewd enough to see that salvation would come from the Jewish Messiah. And for that she was granted an extraordinary exception to our Lord's normal practice.

That woman had the vision to speak constructively about Jesus' mission – she saw that in time Jesus would bless everybody, not only the Jews. The gentile was right there, standing in Jesus' presence and was not rejected. She had arrived empty-handed and was sent away full. Crumbs of mercy had more than satisfied her.

Which brings us to humility. Can we aspire to it and have it tested? Can we admit that sometimes we are wrong? That we have acted in error or made a false judgment? If we are proud, we shall be tested and knocked down. Can we be satisfied by crumbs and not be greedy for more? Knowing God makes us humble, and we must be humble if we are not to be humiliated. If we exalt ourselves, we are riding for a fall. The Syro-Phoenician woman was humble enough to stay in a dog humble position and confess her humility. She was looking for crumbs of mercy, and had her faith commended. And her reward was indeed a true miracle that nothing and nobody on earth could give her.

The beginnings of all things are small. If we build our own and personal tower of Babel, the outcome is sure. If we lower ourselves, we can go in just one direction afterwards. The only way in to the church of the nativity in Bethlehem, or in to the monasteries of the western desert in Egypt is to prostrate yourself to go through a door 5 feet high. God's kingdom does not admit big people. Faith without action is useless. In a short while we shall say the creed and receive communion. The creed begins with "we", not "I" – we of all persuasions and beliefs and tongues – "We believe in God". We who are unworthy, and perhaps even occasionally doubting, we shall be invited to gather up the crumbs under the table, just as the Syro-Phoenician woman was bold to ask for. The

prayer of humble access invites us to take the most precious crumbs that can be taken – the crumbs of the banquet of heaven.

This is not about quantity and pecking order, but quality and truth. We are asked to learn how to listen and to speak the language of the Kingdom. That kingdom in which the sick are healed, the deaf hear, the blind see, and the dumb speak. It's a unique language of liberation that we all need to learn, and which we can't afford to remain deaf to. The healing art is a very great challenge. Can we prostrate ourselves and get through that 5 foot door?