

Prophet Without Honor

sermon digest

May 8, 2011

Matthew 13:54-58; Acts 2:22-36

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Six years ago, at the funeral of Pope John Paul II, the cry "*santo subito*" ("sainthood now") was chanted by the crowd in St. Peter's Square. Last week Pope Benedict XVI acted on the popular cry to accelerate the process by which the Roman Catholic Church acknowledges sainthood. Beatification, the declaration that the deceased is blessed by God, and the verification of one related miracle is the first step. Before the final declaration of sainthood, a second miracle after beatification must be examined and verified by the Church. Last week, Sister Marie Simon-Pierre testified to having been healed from Parkinson's after prayers soliciting the help of John Paul.

According to *USA Today* (April 26, 2011) a miracle is a "scientifically inexplicable" recovery from a physical ailment following prayers to the saint. By this definition, had the investigation discovered some natural cause or medical action involved in the nun's recovery from Parkinson's, no miracle would have occurred. Thus, an event which has no scientific or natural explanation is the basic understanding of miracle by the Roman Catholic Church in the process of declaring sainthood. We might add that this is also the popular understanding by a vast majority of non-Catholics and that it is the primary understanding of skeptics who deny the validity of miracle and ridicule anyone who believes in a God who makes exceptions to nature.

Based on the violation of nature, a *Newsweek* poll (May 1, 2000) reported that seventy-nine percent of Americans affirmed belief in the miracles reported in the Bible, while eighty-four percent believe that God continues to perform miracles today. Sixty-seven percent acknowledged having prayed for a miracle, while nearly half of the people polled claimed to have personally experienced or witnessed a miracle. If we rely on polls, miracles both of the Bible and of current experience are beyond question.

Christian scholar-theologian the late Langdon Gilkey commented that we live in the same time-space continuum with the biblical world. The world operates the same way now as it did then. What was possible then is possible now. What was impossible then is impossible now. Whatever happened in the biblical miracles, for Gilkey, they were not violations of nature.

You have to keep in mind, however, that science has also changed. The quantum physics of the last century has enlarged our understanding of nature. Isaac Newton, who died in 1727, described a world of immutable natural law. As a child I was taught that gravity means, "what goes up must come down." But I have lived to witness the failure of this earth-centered understanding of gravity. In my lifetime, stuff has gone up, that is, has been sent out into space never again to return to earth. Are space probes miracles? Inconsistencies in nature, suggesting exceptions and uniqueness thought impossible a century ago, are viewed as part of the natural order by scientists today. If unpredictable, random events occur naturally, is the occurrence of something beyond scientific understanding a miracle? What if it is beyond today's science but not necessarily beyond the understanding of science a thousand years from now?

People with sincere faith struggle with biblical miracles; but I would dare to suggest that people who lived in biblical epochs, for example Moses in the time of the Exodus or Peter in the time of Christ, would be more astounded at automobiles, airplanes, telephones, and organ transplants than we are of the walking on water, calming a storm, casting out demons, or opening blind eyes. In light of the world's vague understanding of the definition of miracle and the moving boundary of our perception of the universe can we base our faith on "miraculous" exceptions to the order of nature?

We need a biblical understanding of the miraculous. Peter was preaching to the Jerusalem crowd on Pentecost. He described Jesus of Nazareth as one "attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you." John wrote that he came among his own people and was rejected. The other three Gospels elaborated on the visit to Nazareth where Jesus rises to speak in his hometown synagogue. Although the home folks were "astounded" at his teaching and wondered where he got his wisdom and power, they were offended. They knew his parents and his siblings. They concluded that he could not be in any sense special. And Jesus states a rule that tends to hold up in current experience: "Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house." Furthermore, Jesus performed no miracles at home because of the absence of faith. Although Peter addresses the Jewish mind at Pentecost and the Gospels are critical of the Jewish community in Nazareth, this is not an attempt to paint the whole family of Israelites with the same broad brush. In fact, the disciples of Jesus were also Jews.

The experience is repeated throughout the Gospels, the public is audience to events of healing the sick, restoring vision to the blind, cleansing lepers, and even raising the dead: while some are moved to follow Jesus, others either deny the validity of what they have seen or attribute the exhibition of power to demonic evil. Miracle workers were a dime a dozen in

that era. Just as many of us take a dim view of the demonstrations of miraculous healing done by the likes of Benny Hinn, witnesses to the acts of Jesus were not ready believers. They had to be convinced by something more than the information gathered by their senses.

The believers were not more gullible than the unbelievers. Faith has nothing to do with being primed for blind acceptance of facts or with being naive and unwilling to question their own senses. What seems to be apparent here is that faith in God produced eyes to see God in Christ. The eyes of faith recognize God in others.

Although Peter chides the crowd in Jerusalem for their blindness to the works of Jesus and accuses them of crucifying him by the hands of lawless people, the Romans, he does not write them off as unbelievers. His sermon is a call to faith in God, not faith in miracles. The miracles were evidences of the acts of God in Christ. The resurrection of Jesus, the ultimate miracle, was not something that Jesus demonstrated to his followers; it was an act of God: "God raised him up."

The eyes of faith perceive the presence of God. If we are paying attention to the biblical witnesses to events that occurred long before the rise of modern science, we cannot be satisfied to define a miracle by its unscientific qualities or by its inconsistency with nature. In this regard, I would suggest that the Vatican standard and public opinion has missed the boat. A miracle is an act of God. It may be completely within the bounds of the natural order, or it may be a phenomenal experience unlike anything ever seen before or after. To be able to explain does not explain away God.

Reginald Fuller (*Interpreting the Miracles*, p. 9) notes that biblical miracles are not necessarily breaches of the laws of nature or even what we know of nature. They do not fit into the insurance category of "acts of God," which is the explanation of last resort after all reason has failed. Miracles are events that faith recognizes as acts of God. The eyes of faith see God in events, while others are able to see only the events themselves.

In the work of Jesus, the lame walk, the blind see, lepers are cleansed, psychotics and epileptics are healed, demons are exorcized, a bleeding disorder is stopped, a deaf mute hears and speaks, a storm is calmed, water is changed to wine, a boy's lunch feeds a multitude, and the dead are resuscitated. Some of these events seem to have a natural explanation in light of modern science; others appear to violate the order of nature and stand beyond all possible understanding. However, all of these events are windows to the presence and power of God in the world.

Last week I encountered a letter from a mother to a teenage daughter on "Why Miracles are Rare." It raised more questions than answers. The mother asks about the kind of world envisioned in the expectation of miracles on demand. What if God were to grant our requests and were to set aside the normal functions of nature? What if God catches me every time I fall or protects me from every infection or allows me to age without dying or keeps the fire from burning the child or turns the tornado away from my house and into yours or slows the rotation of the earth for a few hours to extend my need for sleep? It would be a world without order, but mostly, a world that conforms to my selfish wishes. For the one writing the letter, the ultimate issue is life and death: "And the great miracle—Easter—doesn't encourage us to expect God to perform miracles every day. It teaches us that the miracle of new life comes only on the other side of the cross and the grave." (*Christian Century*, July 13-20, 1994, p. 674)