

Caritas Fellowship
Miracles—Intro
6 October 2011

Lk 1.30-34

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?"

Acts 17.30-32

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead." 32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, "We will hear you again about this."

Acts 26.22-26

To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: 23 that the Christ must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to the people and to the Gentiles." 24 And as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are mad; your great learning is turning you mad." 25 But Paul said, "I am not mad, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking the sober truth. 26 For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak freely; for I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this was not done in a corner.

Jn 2.11

This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Lk 5.18-26

And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, 19 but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. 20 And when he saw their faith, he said, "Man, your sins are forgiven you." 21 And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" 22 When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, "Why do you question in your hearts? 23 Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? 24 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the man who was paralyzed—"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home." 25 And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God. 26 And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen extraordinary things today."

J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*

The laws of nature ... describe the ways in which the world—including, of course, human beings—works when left to itself, when not interfered with. A miracle occurs when the world is not left to itself, when something distinct from the natural order as a whole intrudes into it.

St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*

WHAT is entirely subject to established order cannot work beyond that order. But every creature is subject to the order which God has established in nature. No creature therefore can work beyond this order, which working beyond the order of nature is the meaning of working miracles.

2. When any finite power works the proper effect to which it is determined, that is no miracle, though it may surprise one who does not understand the operation. But the power of every creature is limited to some definite effect, or effects. Whatever therefore is done by the power of any creature cannot properly be called a miracle. But what is done by the power of God, infinite and incomprehensible, is properly a miracle.

3. Every creature in its action requires some subject to act upon: for it belongs to God alone to make a thing out of nothing (B. II, Chap. XXI). But nothing that requires a subject for its action can act except to the production of those effects to which that subject is in potentiality: for the work of action upon a subject is to educe that subject from potentiality to actuality. As then a creature can never create, so it can never act upon a thing except to the production of that which is in the potentiality of that thing. But in many miracles done by divine power a thing is done, which is not in the potentiality of that upon which it is done, as in the raising of the dead.

Hence it is said of God: Who doth great wonderful works alone (Ps. cxxxv, 4).*

Rudolph Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*

It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.

Vaclav Havel

I am not sure I know what a miracle is. In spite of this, I dare say that, at this moment, I am participating in a miracle: the man who six months ago was arrested as an enemy of the state stands here today as the president of that state, and bids welcome to the first pontiff in the history of the Catholic Church to set foot in this land...

...I am not sure that I know what a miracle is. In spite of this, I dare say that at this moment I am participating in a miracle: in a country devastated by the ideology of hatred, the messenger of love has arrived; in a country devastated by the government of the ignorant, the living symbol of culture has arrived; in a country that, until a short time ago, was devastated by the idea of confrontation and division in the world, the messenger of peace, dialogue, mutual tolerance, esteem and calm understanding, the messenger of fraternal unity in diversity has arrived.

C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*

For this reason, the question whether miracles occur can never be answered simply by experience. Every event which might claim to be a miracle is, in the last resort, something presented to our senses, something seen, heard, touched, smelled, or tasted. And our senses are not infallible. If anything extraordinary seems to have happened, we can always say that we have been the victims of an illusion. If we hold a philosophy which excludes the supernatural, this is what we always shall say. What we learn from experience depends on the kind of philosophy we bring to experience. It is therefore useless to appeal to experience before we have settled, as well as we can, the philosophical question.

If immediate experience cannot prove or disprove the miraculous, still less can history do so. Many people think one can decide whether a miracle occurred in the past by examining the evidence "according to the ordinary rules of historical inquiry." But the ordinary rules cannot be worked until we have decided whether miracles are possible, and if so, how probable they are. For if they are impossible, then no amount of historical evidence will convince us. If they are possible but immensely improbable, then only mathematically demonstrative evidence will convince us: and since history never provides that degree of evidence for any event, history can never convince us that a miracle occurred. If, on the other hand,

miracles are not intrinsically improbable, then the existing evidence will be sufficient to convince us that quite a number of miracles have occurred. The result of our historical enquiries thus depends on the philosophical views which we have been holding before we even began to look at the evidence. The philosophical question must therefore come first.

...I use the word *Miracle* to mean an interference with Nature by supernatural power...

...The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. They say that God became Man. Every other miracle prepares for this or exhibits this, or results from this. Just as every natural event is the manifestation at a particular place and moment of Nature's total character, so every particular Christian miracle manifests at a particular place and moment the character and significance of the Incarnation. There is no question in Christianity of arbitrary interferences just scattered about. It relates not a series of disconnected raids on Nature but the various steps of a strategically coherent invasion—an invasion which intends complete conquest and 'occupation'. The fitness, and therefore credibility, of the particular miracles depends on their relation to the Grand Miracle; all discussion of them in isolation from it is futile."

Dwight Longnecker, "Miracles"

When faced with supposed supernatural activity the Church does not deny or affirm. She does not say all weeping Madonnas are a trick, nor does she say they are an authentic miracle. She withholds judgement. When someone claims to see the face of Mother Teresa in a bagel or the image of the Virgin Mary in the glass of a tower block the church authorities usually do not comment. Faced with stigmatists, miracle workers, incorrupt bodies and heavenly apparitions the Church doesn't deny or affirm. When a supposedly supernatural occurrence is so prominent that the church is forced to comment she always advises caution. We are told to look for all the natural explanations first. So when Pope John XXIII's body was exhumed and found to be incorrupt the Vatican officials quite wisely said it was "remarkably well preserved", and didn't suggest that there was necessarily anything miraculous about it.

The church takes the safe middle ground. In contrast to this balanced view there are two extreme positions taken in our society. The skeptical person says, "Miracles cannot happen because there is no such thing as miracles." On the other hand, the gullible person believes every "miracle" that comes along and is amazed by every strange event without question. Our society is awash with these two extreme views, and we desperately need the sound and sensible middle way...

...To deny miracles and to be gullible are both wrong. Instead we should live happily with the possibility of miracles. If we believe in a God who made the world, then it is no problem to believe that he might sometimes interfere with the world he has made. Miracles are not a contradiction of nature. They are the confirmation that there is someone bigger than nature. A miracle reminds us that creation is alive and open-ended. Anything can happen. With God nothing is impossible. The universe is therefore much more like a party than a stage play.

Catholics are people who live quite easily with the possibility of miracles, while not being that impressed by them. The attitude of St Thomas Aquinas illustrates the best Catholic attitude to supernatural events. During his lifetime a nun became famous for her ability to levitate. Thousands flocked to the monastery to see the nun floating up by the ceiling. Thomas Aquinas was taken to see the amazing sight, and after witnessing it he simply shrugged his shoulders and said, "I didn't know nuns wore such big boots."

**Caritas: www.caritasfellowship.org • Church of the Holy Communion: www.holycomm.org
Fr. Patrick Allen: patrick@holycomm.org; 722.2024**