

MARK AND MIRACLES

Mark 6:45-51 [MW21-09]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton Sunday 07 March 2021

Do you believe in miracles?

- the possibility of 'ordinary miracles'
like the White Ferns beating England in a One Day International cricket match?
- or what about the more extraordinary kind of miracle
like Joe Biden and Donald Trump working out their differences??

Do you believe in miracles? Good

- so do I! Well I do!

I was reading a very old Biblical Commentary – 6th edition 1921

- referring to Mark 6:45-51 the writer made these comments:

The miracle is one of those that in our present state cannot be explained away ...

... here is a miracle upon inanimate matter, overcoming the difference in specific gravity between water and the human body, so that the water will support the heavier body. This miracle will yield to no rationalising treatment ... we are confronted with the problem of the miraculous without any deviation. And so it is with the problem of the miraculous as a fact with which the life of the Lord confronts us.

That last sentence is pretty much close to Mark's heart I think

- the life of Jesus confronts us with the problem of the miraculous as a fact
and Mark leaves the question with us, the readers and hearers
- what does it do afterwards? what difference does it make?

Mark is a short gospel – yet jam-packed, with nothing superfluous

- Mark's framework and editing aid our understanding
what is this story doing here? and what does it mean?
- in this one incident of Jesus walking on the water
a whole lot of things bounce off

Notice for example what Mark records happening in one 24 hour period of Jesus' life

- Jesus learns his friend John the Baptist has been killed (6:29)
the disciples return full of themselves (6:30)
when Jesus and the disciples head off for some R and R a huge crowd turns up
- a crowd of more than five thousand are fed
this same crowd is dispersed
- Jesus withdraws to pray
Jesus goes out of his way to give comfort to his disciples

Now for Mark, Jesus' miracles are like Jesus' parables

- sure you can enjoy them at face-value, as a good story
however the miracles also point beyond, to a larger reality

For Mark, miracles tend to do one of two things

- produce amazement, usually in the crowd
or produce fear, usually in the disciples
- the one thing miracles of themselves do not do, is produce faith

Miracles of themselves did not produce faith

- in fact in Mark miracles are more likely to highlight a lack of faith we, the audience, learn and are encouraged typically those who were actually there miss the point!

Surrounding today's miracle

- we get the suggestion that the people, that huge crowd were happy to listen to Jesus and be fed
- and note that the reaction to this miraculous feeding is not to recognise Jesus as the 'suffering servant' rather the people want to crown him king
- the disciples it would appear have returned on a high and want to get straight on with the job
- so Jesus sends the disciples away, right away – immediately then Jesus disperses the crowd, itself no mean feat
- and then Jesus goes off to pray to recover his equilibrium, to get back on track

With that huge crowd gone

- there is no one but Jesus praying and the disciples rowing across the lake

What happens next is a recurring pattern in Mark's gospel

- whenever the Master, Jesus, is absent the disciples find themselves in distress
- and each time the disciples experience this anguish it is because they lack faith
- in today's case the physical exhaustion of the disciples was aggravated by stark terror when they encountered what they thought was a ghost

Mark emphasises that Jesus comes to the disciples because he perceived their distress

He could see that the disciples were struggling hard, because they were rowing against the wind. Not long before morning, Jesus came toward them (6:48)

- Jesus could see that they were wearing themselves out and desired to reveal his presence to them to reassure them

Jesus came in response to the disciples' distress

- he didn't wave from the mountainside he didn't shout from the shore
- Jesus came, right to where the disciples were ... and yet the disciples weren't sure what they saw

In his book *In the Eye of the Storm*, Max Lucado writes about this particular incident:

There is a window in your heart through which you can see God. Once upon a time that window was clear. Your view of God was crisp. You could see God as vividly as you could see a valley or hill side. The glass was clean, the pane unbroken. Then suddenly the window cracked. A pebble broke the window. A pebble of pain, or tragedy or heartbreak. The pebble missed into the pane and shattered it. The crash echoed down the halls of your heart. Cracks shot out from the point of impact creating a spider web of fragmented pieces. And suddenly God was not so easy to see.

Max Lucado says most of us have some experience like this

- we look for God but can't find him
fragmented glass hinders our vision
- he is enlarged through this piece, reduced through that one
large sections of shattered glass opaque the view
- we aren't quite sure what we see ...
... just like the disciples in the boat, on the lake, alone, at night, in the storm

Imagine the incredible strain of bouncing from wave to wave in that tiny vessel

- one hour would weary you, two exhaust you
Peter, Andrew, James, John are fishermen, they've seen storms like this before
they've seen the splintered hulls float to shore
and they've attended the funerals
- they know better than anyone this night could be their last
where is Jesus?
why doesn't he come?

And the answer? Max Lucado puts it very succinctly

- when you can't see him, trust him
the figure you see is not a ghost
the voice you hear is not the wind
- Jesus speaks
in the darkness when the disciples are deceived with their eyes
Jesus speaks: *Take courage. It's me. Don't be afraid.*

Jesus climbs into the boat and the wind dies down

- but wait, there's more
Mark tells us the disciples were stunned
shaking their heads, confused, wondering what was going on

These same disciples had been there when that huge crowd was fed

- with five loaves and two fish
they were in the boat when Jesus walked out to them
- yet they failed to grasp that these events pointed beyond themselves
to the secret of who Jesus is
- for Mark, that's what miracles do:
point beyond themselves to who Jesus is, and what he is about
- Jesus is Lord
Lord of the sea and wind and sky, the Lord of all

For a suffering church this was a vital episode

- remember Mark's gospel was probably written in Rome around 65 - 70 AD
a time when followers of Jesus, Christians, were undergoing great persecution
- the combination of danger and rescue conveyed an all-important message:
Jesus has not abandoned his followers
- it gave those facing martyrdom
the assurance of Jesus' saving nearness to all who believe and obey him
- it told them Jesus would be there to help them through the difficulties of life

Storms do come

- there's no avoiding them
what comes also is the presence of Jesus
- a miracle we can count on
it may be four a.m. on the darkest morning
yet Jesus will come with his words and his assurance

Suppose one of the disciples had kept a journal

- and suppose this disciple was reflecting on the storm the morning after
it might read something like this ...

Only minutes before chaos had erupted. Oh how the storm roared. Stars were hidden by a black ceiling. Clouds billowed like smoke. Bolts of lightning were the conductor's baton that cued kettledrums of thunder to rumble ...

In the midst of the sea, our boat bounced. The waves slapped it as easily as children would a ball. Our straining at the oars scarcely budged it. We were at the storm's mercy. The waves lifted us up so high that we felt like we were in midair. Then down into the valley we plunged. That's when the light appeared. At first I thought it was a reflection of the moon, a gleam on the surface of the water. But the night held no moon. I looked again. The light was moving toward us, not over the waves but through them. I wasn't the only one who saw it. "A ghost," someone screamed. Fear of the sea was eclipsed by a new terror. Thoughts raced as the spectre drew near. A flash of lightning illuminated the sky. For a second I could see its face . . . his face. A second was all I needed. It was the Master!

He spoke: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Nothing had changed. The storm still raged. The wind still shrieked. The boat still pitched. The thunder still boomed. The rain still slapped. But in the midst of the tumult I could hear his voice. And, somehow, courage came.

Before I knew it, he was in the boat. The sea stilled as silk. The winds hushed. A canyon opened in the clouds; soft moonlight fell over the water.

There are times in a person's life when, even in the midst of them, you know you'll never be the same. Moments that forever serve as journey posts. This was one. I had never seen Jesus as I saw him then. I had seen him as powerful. I had seen him as wise. I had witnessed his authority and marvelled at his abilities. But what I witnessed last night, I know I'll never forget. I saw God. The God who can't sit still when the storm is too strong. The God who lets me get frightened enough to need him and then comes close enough for me to see him. The God who uses my storms as his path to come to me.

I saw God. It took a storm for me to see him. But I saw him. And I'll never be the same.

[silence] [Slide]

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that our comfort abounds through Christ.

Nothing in the world can bring us the comfort and peace that you alone can offer.

Thank you that you understand our trials, and you care.

*Through our own struggle and pain, help us to be your vessels
to offer comfort and strength to others who are hurting.*

Amen.