

MIRACLES AND THE GOSPELS

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CARDINAL OTTAVIANI, in an article that he wrote in the *Osservatore Romano* in 1951, pointed out that there has been a very great change in the way in which people regard the possibility of miracles today as compared with fifty years ago. Then, under the influence of Modernism and liberal criticism, the tendency was to reject as absurd an element of 'wonder working', or miracle from religion, and to regard any accounts of events purporting to be miraculous as suspect. Now, he observed, the climate of opinion has changed. There is a tendency to be interested in paranormal phenomena, and among certain people this interest has degenerated into an uncritical and irrational appetite for the marvellous in religion. It is very easy, when subjected to such influences, to become interested in the marvellous for its own sake and to regard the supernatural as only consisting in the wonderful and inexplicable. One becomes more interested in stories of miracles worked by saints than in the saints themselves, and the consequent dislocation of religious concentration can lead to outbursts of superstition.

In order to cope with this situation the Catholic has to recall both the traditional Christian view of miracles, and the fact that the final discerning of miracles is the prerogative of the Church. One is not directly concerned with the possibility of non-Christian sages or religious leaders working miracles or with the status of the wonders attributed to demonic influence; these are secondary topics, subsidiary, to the Christian mind, to the discussion of the part played by miracles in the life of the Church.

First the point has to be made, though it cannot be argued in detail here, that the documents on which the Christian faith rests do contain a miraculous element. The witness of the Gospels, for instance, attributes to Christ deeds that are not presented as normal. The events described are stated to be marvels and to arouse wonder and awe in the spectator, who is brought up against some inexplicable occurrence of which the cause is maintained to be God. Not God working in and through the

normal or accustomed order of secondary causes, but God acting beyond this order, or using secondary causes to bring about some effect beyond their normal productive capacity. Each of the incidents is introduced by the evangelists as a perceptible fact that is produced by the intervention of God.

It is impossible, in the interests of some de-mythologizing theory of the nature of religion, to eliminate miracles from the Gospels. The men who wrote the Gospels were convinced they were dealing with miraculous events, and all the evidence suggests that Christ self-consciously made use of supra-normal powers, which indicated his union with the Father. All the rationalist explanations of the Gospel accounts have either a trivial character or turn the accounts into a quite different kind of story. In the face of what was actually reported the factual miracle can only be denied by saying *a priori* that miracles don't happen, or (and this really amounts to the same) that the whole witness of the Gospels is distorted by excessive credulity. St John appears to have provided against this objection, for with his interest in the presence of the non-flesh in the flesh, he gives details of witness, as in the miracles of Cana and the raising of Lazarus, that rest on an appreciation of objective fact. The surprise of the steward of the feast at Cana, or Martha's apprehensions about stench, are integral parts of a story that, by its reference to public perceptible fact, renders the invocation of *a priori* positions irrelevant.

On the other hand the writers of the Gospels are not interested in miracles for their own sake; that is, mere prodigies do not capture their attention. They are only interested in miracles within a context that is provided by the salvific will of God. The point can be illustrated in terms of the life of a saint. Sanctity does not consist in the ability to work miracles, or in any supra-normal gifts. It is essentially the effect of a life of heroic virtue springing from a mind and will renewed and fortified by grace. The close union of the saint to God may lead to his working miracles, but these miracles are but signs of sanctity rather than sanctity itself. In a similar way the miracles of the Gospel are signs that point beyond themselves. They are 'wonderful works' that draw our attention to something else. When St Mark tells the story of a miracle he is telling us of some wonderful event that, taken in relation to the claim Christ made, and the appeal

he makes to the Father, indicates that God is at work in him as authenticating his mission as Messiah and Son of God. For St John the miracles he tells us about are signs that demonstrate that the glory of God is present in the action of Christ.

Miracles occur, then, as part of the historic revelation of God's purpose. They are not acts of sheer, pointless power, but acts in which God's salvific purpose is revealed. The miracles of Exodus (chapters 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11) are prodigies that reveal the working of God the Creator, Lord of Life and Death, but they are far more than that. They are part of the action of deliverance, which, as an event experienced in history, constituted Israel as the chosen people. The strivings of the magicians of Egypt to emulate the miracles of Moses and Aaron are a detail, though an important one, in a story that cannot be interpreted simply as a contest between magic-makers. In one sense the product of the divine intervention is even more astonishing—the unique character and history of the Jews.

The miracles of which St Mark tells us in his fifth chapter are each of them stories about an event that is not only miraculous but also contains a teaching about Christ and man's relation to him in faith or unfaith. At first sight even more clearly, St John's Gospel presses home the teaching that the glory of the only-begotten is seen in the acts and sayings of Christ; the whole episode of the raising of Lazarus is not only a supra-normal incident, it is also, taken as a whole, a teaching about Christ himself as Saviour.

For Scripture miracles are prodigies in which God intervenes, either directly or by making use of secondary causes, to reveal his purpose. These interventions witness to an order higher than that with which we are normally acquainted. Yet they are not lawless violations of natural order. They are rather signs of a higher order, that of God's will and wisdom; each of them says that the cosmos is neither a closed mechanical system, nor a chance affair, but is directed and receives meaning from a plan that God has revealed.

The same is the case when the miracles involved in the life of the Church are considered. This life, we are told in St John's Gospel, will be full of even 'greater signs' than were witnessed by the apostles, and this because the Resurrection of Christ brought about the sending of the Spirit. In the new and re-creative life of the Spirit the power of God is, as it were, unleashed in his chosen community. Those who follow Christ, if they are in

true union with him, become witnesses to the world, and so it is not surprising that their activity is at times blessed by God.

Though it is quite clear, from the Gospels and the tradition of the Church, that miracles are public facts, is also apparent that they are not always recognized as signs. The first part of this statement means that miracles are events that are open to inspection. Indeed they should be inspected and discussed from every point of view as their whole force depends on their ability to sustain such analysis. A miracle, if it be a true miracle and not a fraud, is an event which cannot, either in itself or in the mode of its occurrence, be accounted for by normal causal explanation. Some supra-normal intervention is demanded by the very factual situation itself.

This, however, does not mean that it is easy to recognize miracles as signs, for the mind can stop and merely say inexplicable, and not proceed to say God. Or perhaps it is more common for the mind to flinch, to refuse the challenge of the fact. Since it cannot deny that something happened it proceeds to explain away what did happen. In its simple form this is found in the wonder, of which St Mark speaks. The people found our Lord's actions astonishing, he was a wonder-worker—yet it was an astonishment that has no direction, it did not lead anywhere. For others the ready explanation was: he is mad or has a devil; and therefore there is no need to attend to what he does. St John suggests that the disciples only understood the significance of what had been done after the Spirit was given, and it seems that the full significance of the miraculous event only dawns on the mind illuminated by faith.

This does not mean that miracles are subjective; they have an objective compelling power, but their full meaning as signs is seen only by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is for this reason that the final judgment regarding miracles belongs to the Church, guarding against excessive scepticism and crass superstition. After the miracle has been examined by every resource known to man, after it has been shown that, in the case involved, one must admit the operation of forces that do not, so far as our normal experience goes, play an evident part in the world of inter-related facts; after all this it remains for the Church to decide how this wonder stands in relation to the will of God.