

19<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time Year “A”.  
August 8-9, 2020

*Miracles no remedy for unbelief*

Readings: 1 Kings 19: 9a, 11-13; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14: 22-33

Perhaps no miracle account in Sacred Scripture has so captured the imagination of artists throughout the centuries, as has the miracle of Jesus walking on water. It represents a sheer manifestation of his Lordship, and power over even the laws of nature. While most of Jesus' miracles involve the healing of someone else, this miracle does not apparently have as its purpose the good fortune of someone in dire need. So why did you show forth his power and glory? What point was he trying to make?

I have heard it said by some, “if only we had miracles just like they did during the time of Jesus, then we would believe.” Or, “It would be so much easier to believe if I had the benefit of a miracle.” Would it really? I am quite skeptical about that claim, and do not find it at all convincing.

Years ago, I had been jogging down by Minnehaha Creek in Minneapolis and came upon a television commercial being filmed. The producer had rigged up an elaborate glass shelf such that it appeared that the woman was walking on water. It was fascinating to behold. And quite realistic!

The laws of nature were continually suspended before the eyes of the Israelites, yet so many were stiff-necked and refused to believe. We consider their faith weak— after all, they had these signs that we lack today and still they still refused to believe. The Jews displayed such fickleness in the desert. Yet in all this we fail to notice the similarities between us.

The difference between a miracle and no miracle is much less than we think. And that difference is the presupposition of faith. Some people see miracles as magic and will never be satisfied. True, an event such as the miracle of the sun at Fatima in 1917 changed the mind of some true skeptics, so it can happen, but generally speaking does not. Miracles are no remedy for unbelief. Scripture clearly presumes a basis of faith.

It is a feeble complaint that God fails to afford us the same aids to assent our faith in him because no miracle can command faith, even if it seems unexplainable by any other means. Miracles were then and are now intended to lead people to faith – not to force them to believe. To withhold assent because you have not witnessed a miracle firsthand or to dismiss them completely is to misread their purpose in salvation history.

Consider the story of Elijah from our first reading. He was seeking the presence of the Lord in the wrong places, almost trying to force a miracle when in fact the Lord spoke to him in a whisper. The Israelites were not given more miracles than us, just different types. Cardinal Newman said: Their miracles were wrought upon external nature; the sun stood still, and the sea parted. Ours are invisible, and are exercised upon the soul. They consist in the sacraments...they really touch the heart, though we so often resist their influence.”<sup>1</sup>

Newman’s point was that miracles are no remedy for stubborn unbelief. Absent an open heart, they offer little hope of conversion. Without a basis in faith even the presence of a miracle would wear off. Today’s miracle wore off for Peter almost immediately and he began to sink.

Perhaps the real reason why Jesus walked on the water was to show the disciples the necessity of a faith solidly built on rock, and not on passing fascination. It demonstrates how quickly our faith can falter, and how truly vulnerable we are.

Newman’s sermon cited earlier challenges us to “put aside vain excuses, and instead of looking for outward events to change our course of life, be sure of this, that if our course of life is to be changed, it must be from within.”<sup>2</sup> That is the key. We must be willing to change from within.

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<sup>1</sup> John Henry Newman, *Plain and Parochial Sermons*, Sermon VIII-6 “Miracles no Remedy for Unbelief” (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1987) p.1604

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1605

The Eucharist is a miracle of which we partake every Sunday, by which the very Body and Blood of Jesus is made present sacramentally. Today's very episode took place immediately after Jesus performed the miracle of the loaves, which we heard last Sunday.

May we understand that nothing except the love of God allows us to believe in him or to obey him. For those who believe in miracles no proof is necessary; for those who do not believe, no proof is possible. Where do we stand?