

THE GOSPEL TO THE YOUNG

SIGNS OF THE KINGDOM: MIRACLES

It's certainly not easy these days to talk about miracles. Confronted by this problem, one Catholic writer of the 1960s, Louis Evely, wrote in a provocative and highly debatable fashion, "Our ancestors believed in God because of miracles; we, nowadays, despite miracles."

On the other hand, *miracle* is often used to describe phenomena out of the ordinary, as when one speaks of "miracles of technology," or worse yet, as when one's mixed up with magic and witchcraft, which unfortunately are so widespread even in so-called "first world" countries. We have to point out that miracles in a Christian sense have nothing to do with any of that.

A "miracle" consists, first of all, in an action by God within the world and in human lives. Fundamentally, it reminds us that he is the Lord of Creation and of history. Let's go right to the source from which we can understand what a miracle is: the life and action of Jesus, the Son of God made Man. Through the Gospels, which certainly don't consist of a detailed "chronicle" of what he did, but are above all testimonies of faith, we arrive at a solid and sure historical nucleus.

In St. Mark's gospel, the oldest, the accounts of miracles take up almost half of the section that precedes the Lord's passion and death. They appear in barely lesser proportion in the gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke, as well. St. John's gospel reduces their number to seven, but their relevance grows in such a way that the whole part which refers to Jesus' public life (from the second chapter to the twelfth) is often called "the book of signs," given the importance that John attributes to miracles, accenting their character of revealing the nature and the mission of the Lord. In conclusion, very little of the gospels remains, outside the Passion narratives, if we want to take away the miracle stories. But it's not only their quantity that stands out, but also their relevance and centrality.

■ **To penetrate into the meaning** of these extraordinary actions of Jesus, let's reflect on a particularly significant gospel text. Already imprisoned on account of King Herod, John the Baptist sends two of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Luke 7:19-21; cf. Matt 11:3). It's not an idle question, nor does it demonstrate curiosity; the one who's asking is the Precursor, he who was charged with preparing the way for him "who was to come." It's an expression that refers to the Messiah, the Savior whom God had promised to his people. Besides being "entitled" to ask such a question, the imminent danger of death in which John found himself helps us to understand the question this way: "Can I die at peace, or is my mission not yet finished?" Luke adds a detail with respect to Matthew's text: "Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.'" (Luke 7:21-23; cf. Matt 11:4-6)

Jesus' answer is one of total clarity for someone who knows, as the Baptist does, the prophecy that lays out, so to say, the "credentials" of his own claim to be the Messiah, those signs that authenticate him, according to the words of the Old Testament prophets, Isaiah above all (26:19; 29:18; 35:5; 42:7; 61:1). It's in this sense for John a much more certain answer than simply telling him, "Yes, I'm the one"—which wouldn't have given the prisoner any guarantee of certainty, especially given that the gospels don't hide the fact that the Messianic character of Jesus doesn't correspond with the kind John was waiting for.

■ **The words of Jesus in this text show a progression** in "miraculous" actions, leading up to the most important: restoring life to the dead. But that's not enough; there's a still greater sign: **"the poor have good news brought to them."** We find here, very clearly stated, the value and the limits of miracles. The "sign" par excellence isn't the prodigies, however extraordinary, but the preaching of the Kingdom. On this horizon of the Kingdom, the miracles, while they are a "pre-announcement" of the *integral* salvation God has destined for us—in which an essential role unfolds also for the body that we not only *have*, but that *we are*—at the same time they constitute also an invitation to welcome the Kingdom and collaborate in building it. For Jesus the miracle isn't the goal but the starting point; and still less is it a substitute for faith, nor is it a consequence.

We find other passages in the gospels in which Jesus makes even more relative the value of miracles. When the Pharisees and the scribes, who aren't receptive to his message, demand impressive signs from him, the Lord answers, "This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah" (Luke 11:29-30). This "sign" in Jonah's case was nothing but his preaching, in which there was no extraordinary element but which provoked Nineveh's complete conversion. We see even more radically how miracles are of such relative worth in the parable of Lazarus and the self-centered rich man. At the end of the parable, when the rich man asks Abraham to allow Lazarus to appear to his brothers in order that they might be converted, Abraham answers, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31). In St. John's gospel we find the same dynamic: where Jesus doesn't find what is most basic to the believer, namely **faith**, his "signs" have no efficacy: the Jews who receive bread that's been miraculously multiplied, in the end abandon him (cf. John 6).

Worse yet: we have to recognize that the miracles which Jesus has carried out didn't render his mission and preaching easier or more acceptable, but paradoxically they were one of the factors which led to his death. The most dramatic expression we find of this in St. John's gospel is that the leaders of the people decide to put Jesus to death ... because he gives life (cf. John 11:45-53; 12:9-11)!

■ **It would be very interesting** to continue this theme by examining carefully a question that for many Catholics constitutes a problem: the meaning of the miracles which we seek from the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints. On the one hand it's beyond doubt that every miracle is the work of God alone; but it's also certain that the intercession of the Mother of God is powerful and so is that of her "friends," the saints. Evangelization and catechesis have to purify this typical tendency of popular piety, without considering it on that account something erroneous or a vestige of "paganism."

We see in the processes of beatification and canonization an example of a healthy balance on the part of the Church in the face of miracles: no one is declared a saint simply because he has accomplished great actions, including miracles; instead, his entire life is thoroughly analyzed. But in order for this process to reach its climax, it *must* be certified that God has carried out a miracle through his intercession.

In Don Bosco's life we find frequent extraordinary interventions by God which we may qualify in some cases as authentic miracles. Don Bosco himself alludes to this when he says: "If you trust in Mary Help of Christians, you'll see what miracles are." Even so, this confidence in God and the Virgin Mary didn't spare him from tireless self-giving and limitless fatigue for the good of his boys. In sum, Don Bosco too would have accepted a sentence which is more than just a pun because it contains a very profound truth: the greatest miracle that God can carry out in our lives is that we come to believe in his Love without needing miracles. ■