

❖SERMON PREACHED BY THE DEAN ON SUNDAY 14 AUGUST 2011

To-day's gospel provides a good opportunity to think about the various miracles of healing which were performed by our Lord-

For some people, I know, they lie at the root of their Christian faith. For them they make a complete nonsense of religion and represent their main reasons for having nothing more to do with it; for them again, miracles represent a puzzle - many people don't quite know what to make of them - whether acceptance of the fact of miracles is basic to being a Christian believer or not.

People outside the church sometimes say that miracle workers are to be found in all ancient religions and were to be found among our Lords pagan contemporaries. And they are quite right in this - No sensible Christian should deny it - all the healing techniques used by Jesus during his ministry are known to have formed

part of the healing procedures of other contemporary wonder workers - for indeed Tacitus records that the Emperor Vespasian performed healings by means of his saliva. Moreover, the New Testament itself ascribes miraculous cures to people other than Jesus. So it can be said that the New Testament was put together in an age which took miraculous happenings and faith healings for granted - indeed here in Ireland we are very close to that sort of environment: because some of us probably know individuals who have a gift of healing which runs in their family in which they feel privileged to practise. - without payment too. The point is that they see their gift - as we should all see our own various skills - as gifts from God to be used to further his purposes of love in this world. But let's be clear about a difference between our Lord's Day and ours. We are well used to making a division between physical and psychological disorders: indeed, it could be said that we make too much of a division in ignoring the very real connection between our mental state and our physical condition. But in our Lord's day there was no distinction at all. The gospel writers believed, as did the great majority of their contemporaries both Jews and pagans, in the presence of the evil activity of demons - everywhere - and that it was possible to overcome them by miraculous means. The story of the demons being transferred into the Gadarine swine just like a swarm of bees into a skip is merely the most vivid example of that pretty well universal belief. Well, I don't think we believe that any more. The old Book of Common Prayer believes that all physical illness is a punishment for sin: well I don't think many people believe that any more either - which just shows that people will get on with quietly revising their theology in the light of their experience regardless of what the clergy have to say about it. The birth statistics in

this state show that the vast majority of Roman Catholics are ignoring their church's prohibition of artificial birth control.

But to return to the New Testament. Miracles and the question with which I began: Do we have to accept them "in faith"? I hope I have shown that faith-healing then and now is not necessarily a mark of Divinity nor more importantly, an indication of Jesus' uniqueness. What we do have to accept "in faith" is that God works through people as his agents for good in the world and that these people are not exempted or removed from the ordinary assumptions of the society and culture in which they happen to find themselves.

I think you might find it helpful to look at the question of miracles the other way round for a change. Supposing physical miracles were to be the main basis for our faith in God where does that land us? For a start, there wouldn't have been any

need for the life and death of Jesus at all. God could simply have appeared to one or more individuals with a message to call the world to repentance- rather as Mary is said to have appeared to the child Bernadette at Lourdes. But dazzling or frightening us into following his commands isn't God's way with us. He gives us a snap-shot of, as it were, "God in action" living, living and suffering amongst us as one of us. Jesus, his life, ministry and death is a sort of trailer for what a life lived as a child of God should really be like. That's how God attracts us to follow him – not by dazzling us with miracles.

What is, I think, a balanced view of how we should see the miraculous element in the gospels – is indeed in our own lives – is given by the English theologian Geoffrey Lampe who had this to say:

“If on other grounds, we believe that God was actively present in Jesus and that (through Jesus) God's kingdom was being brought within men's' reach, the miracles can be understood as signs of this truth and as confirming it; but the miracle stories in themselves are not an adequate foundation for our belief”.

But signs are only for those with eyes to see them. However impressed the people of Galilee may have been by Jesus' miraculous healings, very few of them went so far as to throw in their lot with his. Miracles, it seems, were not enough to convince the unbelievers. Isn't it the same today?