

Sermon preached at St Mary's on Sunday 26th August

The healing of a deaf mute, Mark chapter 7.

One writer, John Foster has written 'Miracles are the great bell of the Universe which draws men to God's sermon'

But not always. Someone recently said to me... "I can't accept all that stuff about miracles... feeding 5000 with a few buns and fish. and that kind of thing. " It's probably the only miracle he knows or can remember, and that goes for many.

We have become a biblically illiterate nation. We hardly ever open the book which we are assured in the Coronation service is 'the most precious thing that this world affords'.

So it was no surprise that in the middle of last century one Anglican Bishop, John Robinson wrote a book entitled 'Honest to God' It's a catchy title. Some of you will remember it. In it he says that 'man has come of age! " He has outgrown supernatural things, the Virgin birth, the resurrection and miracles. They are myths. Fairy tales for grown-ups. The 'Buzz' word was 'demythologise' It sounded cool, and man come of age was flattered. (We are easily flattered.) and couldn't wait to beat a path to Waterstones.

Honest to God sold like hot cakes, and the Bishop's message spread a new version of agnosticism and a lot of disenchantment. The good news is that most of the Bishops distanced themselves from Honest to God One correspondent commented 'Do you think the Bishop is in the right job?'

But the question marks persist. There's something of the agnostic in all of us. We wouldn't be human if it wasn't. But (to be honest!) we need enough of the truth to see us through sd Christians.

Can we take the miracles at face value without suspending our minds and brains? Are they the 'Great bell of the universe still'? Or are they the invention of a well-meaning supporter to add weight to the claims of Jesus? How can we be sure? The answer is - Not without reference to Holy Scripture.

Take the Apostles witness. St Peter addressing the crowd on the day of Pentecost...(Acts 2) ' Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God you by miracles, wonders and signs which God did among you , as you yourselves know." St Paul speaking to philosophers in Athens (Acts 17 "God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the Man he has appointed. He has given proof of that to all men by raising Him from the dead!'" St James, the brother of Jesus was the first Bishop of Jerusalem, courageously flying the Gospel flag in the heart of enemy territory. St John at the end of his account of Jesus's life (Chapter 21,25) 'Jesus did many other things. If everyone of them was written down I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written!! It's exaggeration, of course, but we know what he means. Whatever did the Bishop make of that? And the one thing that all of these holy men of God had in common was that they would soon die for their faith in the great miracle worker.

Take Jesus's testimony about the miracles. in Jon 5 verse 36 The work (plural in original Greek - 'works') which the Father has given me to finish...testify that the Father has sent me. The miracles authenticate his divinely appointed mission.

And St John, in chapter 20.v31 leaves the challenge of the miracles at the readers doorstep. 'These are written down, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and as you believe (through your faith in Him) you might have life, His life, in His Name. The gall is in your court!

Lastly, there's the style of the miracles. The way Jesus went about his 'work'. What clues can we get from the miracles themselves to make us confident in their credibility?

Let's look at the story of the deaf-mute in Mark 7. Let's be literary critics for a few moments.

Mark 7 31 - 37 Some people brought a man.... It illustrates Jesus's way of treating people. To Jesus he wasn't a case but an individual. He takes the man aside...away from the public eye. Deaf people are often a bit embarrassed. He won't embarrass him. He enacts in dumb-show what he is going to do. He put his hands in the man's ears and touched his tongue with spittle. Then he looked up heaven to acknowledge where his authority and power came from, and said Ephphatha, and the man was healed... 'Immediately', as St Peter often put it.

That was it! So low key, so simple - some spit...a touch...a look up...a sigh, an (unpronounceable!) word, and the man is healed. Where were the histrionics we would expect from a miracle worker? They weren't needed.

And the crowd has the last word. 'He has done all things well!' The understatement of all history!

Almost exactly the word of God's judgement on his own creation, in Genesis 1.31 God saw that it was very good. Then things went wrong. Man declared UDI and has been flawed ever since.

So when Jesus came bringing healing to men's bodies and salvation to their souls, it was as if he began the miracle of creation all over again and is doing it right down to our day. St Paul writes When anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. 2 Corinthians chapter 5.

As the song writer put it... It took a miracle to put the stars in place, It took a miracle to hang the world in space. But when he saved my soul, cleansed and made me whole. it took a miracle of love and grace. And many, if not all of us, here today can say Amen to that.