

The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

MIRACULOUS POWERS

Today we come to the gift of miraculous works/powers and maybe for some of us, if not all of us, this evokes the same feelings and thoughts as healing! Again we come with different experiences and possibly very different thoughts and theologies of the idea of miraculous works/powers.

So let's pray; "Father, in your love and grace and mercy, take all that we bring today, and meet us where we are, and move us closer to where you want us to be." Amen.

A couple of introductory comments would be important. Paul uses the double plural to say miraculous powers/works. So its literal meaning is "workings of powers". This is similar to "gifts of healings", and this gift then has a varied ministry. This gift could be defined as "the special ability to perform acts of extraordinary supernatural power, performed in the power of the Holy Spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ."

As we noted last week, some gifts seem to go together. The gift that goes with the gift of miraculous powers/works is the gift of faith, the gift of faith being: 'the unshakeable confidence that God is about to act to resolve a seemingly impossible situation.'

We might well find ourselves asking what is the difference between "healings" and "miraculous powers?" Well it would probably be true to say that healings are themselves in some sense at least "miraculous!" Possibly what Paul has in mind when he talks of miraculous powers/works, is a public demonstration of extraordinary charismatic power. And this could take a number of forms. If we look at the life of Jesus we can see this. On three occasions, all public, he raises people from the dead: Jairus' daughter; the son of the widow of Nain, and Lazarus.

Jesus also performed miracles of nature:-

- He turned water into wine
- He calmed the storm
- He multiplied 5 loaves and 2 fish to feed over 5000

Jesus performed healings – over the demonic, physical and mental.

What we notice in all of these miracles is:-

- They were public
- They were immediate
- They were dramatic
- They evoked wonder and awe

- They involved radical transformation

From this, it is probably true to say that not all healing in this sense is a miraculous work. Relational healing – reconciliation - may well happen over a period of time between two people! When people come to saving faith – a form of healing – it is not always public and dramatic. Sometimes physical healing happens gradually! Psychological healing can happen over time – the healing of self-worth is often a long road of healing. The healing of past hurts, traumas or wounds can be a long road. Sometimes, perhaps a whole community – a church – can experience healing through repentance and prayer, or a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. All these are likely to be less visible, less immediate and less dramatic – but none less real, and probably not what Paul has in mind as “miraculous powers/works.”

As with healing I believe that God can, and does, perform miraculous works today! For the rest of this talk I want to turn to a story in Acts 9.

Acts 9 v 36 -43 reads: ‘In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, “Please come at once!” Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning towards the dead woman, he said, “Tabitha, get up.” She opened her eyes, and seeing Paul she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive. This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner name Simon.

This story may help us in the practice of this gift. The points I’m about to make I’ve borrowed from a book I’ve been reading by Mark Stibbe. First, miracles occur in the context of great need, why is it that many of the stories of miracles we hear come from other, poorer parts of the world? Listening to a friend of mine who was listening to a Pastor from Nigeria seemed to bear this out. He said that healing happened all the time! I was telling you last week of the Christians in Cairo who were seeing amazing things happen – one reason may be the lack of health care – or certainly less that we have. But another is the sense of desperation – there is no-where else for them to turn than to God. Jesus said: “Blessed are the poor!” Not because they are poor, but because they will more readily turn to God. Perhaps our problem is that we are far more self-sufficient! Truth is, we are probably far less dependant upon God. Interestingly, in Acts 9, Tabitha was a woman who ministered to the poor and it is likely that she was herself poor – Luke implies that she was a widow. When she dies – the poor lost their help – or at least some of it. This story takes place in the context of great poverty and scripture teaches God has a bias for the poor!

Second, miracles occur in the atmosphere of faith. Tabitha’s friends exercise faith. They do not bury the body – as was the custom – they send instead for Peter (who they hear is nearby). They wash the body

in accordance with Jewish purification laws and they lay it in the upstairs room. The implication is that Peter will be used by God to do a remarkable, supernatural work. Their expectation is that Peter will come at once and a miracle will happen - the gift of Faith at work – an unshakable conviction that God is about to do the impossible. Perhaps it is when, out of sheer desperation, people take hold of God’s word and believe it with the passionate simplicity of a child, that gives God room to do his work. This comes as a challenge to those of us who tend to be over-sophisticated in our dealings with God.

Third – miracles occur through true disciples. “Disciple” means learner and Peter was a learner. It really means one who learns from the Master. Peter had seen Jesus raise a little girl – and here he seems to follow what Jesus had done. In Luke 8 we have the story of the raising to life of Jairus’ daughter. Jairus, a ruler of the local synagogue, comes to Jesus and implores him to come and heal his daughter who is dying. By the time they get there the girl is dead. Jesus takes Peter, James and John into the room and only allows the father and mother to stay with them. Jesus takes the girl by the hand and speaks in Aramaic: “Talitha, coum” which means, “Little girl, get up.” In Acts 9 Peter follows a very similar pattern – following what the Master had done. He dismisses the mourners from the room. He then prays and says: “Tabitha, coum” – Aramaic for “Tabitha – get up!” He then took her by the hand and helped her up! Miracles occur only through those who are truly disciples of Jesus – the Master – and to whom he bestows this particular gift.

Fourth, miracles occur when compassion prevails. In Mathew 14, Jesus tries to get a time of quiet away from the crowds by boat, but they hear where he is and follow him: “When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.” (v 13) With Peter and Tabitha we see compassion win over prejudice. From a Jewish perspective what Peter was asked to do, required on his part, great love. Although the body had been washed, for a Jew to enter a room in which a corpse lay was no easy thing – it would defile him! Yet compassion prevailed. At the end of the story, Peter stays in the house of Simon the tanner. Tanners worked with the skins of dead animals – which for a Jew like Peter meant they were impure! Actually this is excellent preparation for what happens to Peter in Acts 10! He goes to the gentile Cornelius – with whom he should not associate – and realises through a vision that God loves all people equally!

Fifthly, miracles occur when we look up to God. In verse 40 – Peter got on his knees to pray, but Luke then says: “Turning towards the dead woman...” This implies that Peter did not look first at the corpse but up at God! His priority was to look to God, and reminding himself of the greatness of God. This is a challenge to us on many levels isn’t it – to look first to God and who he is. Only those who recognize that we have a great God, who acknowledge that we have a “big Jesus” and a “tiny Satan”, and who know in their hearts that nothing can stop the Holy Spirit – ‘only men and women of this level of uncluttered faith, can operate in the gift of miraculous works’¹

Now friends, I would rather be part of a church where people dared to ask for miracles than one that never had the courage or the faith to do so. Miracles are signs of the Kingdom of God that has come with Jesus, but has not yet fully come. They point to the miracle of the new heaven and the new earth, where the gift of miraculous powers/works will no longer be necessary, but for now – miracles offer a glimpse of what is for those who believe and endure.

1. Stibbe M: *“Know your spiritual gifts”* Zondervan 2004 p 108/109

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 22nd June by Rev. Ian Phillips.