

Sermon Series – God with Us

Luke 4:31-44 #6 Signs of God with us 31/01/21

On the night PM Scott Morrison declared victory for the Liberal party at the last federal election he shouted to the gathering, “I have always believed in miracles.”



Today’s Bible reading begs the question, “**Do you believe in miracles?**”

We bandy the word “miracle” around a lot today.

- In TV news a reporter declared it a “miracle” that a baby thrown from a moving car in an accident survived.
- An economic forecaster suggested it would be a “miracle” if the Tokyo Olympics go ahead this year.

Miracles in the New Testament

But when it comes to reports of Jesus in the Bible how do we regard the word “miracle”? What place do miracles have in our faith today?

It was Arthur C. Clarke in 1962 who wrote, “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”¹ And I wonder if the amazement of the people at Jesus’ works was similar to our astonishment at advances today.²



Look at the example in Luke 4:33-27:

³³ In the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, ³⁴ ‘Let us alone! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’ ³⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ When the demon had

¹ 1962, in his book “Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible”. A science fiction writer of note, Arthur C. Clarke formulated his famous Three Laws, of which the third law stated in these words quoted in the sermon

² Notice that it wasn’t just the miracle that amazed, but Jesus’ authoritative teaching too. This connection between Jesus’ words and his actions is important to Luke as verses 43 and 44 bear out.

thrown him down before them, he came out of him without having done him any harm. ³⁶**They were all amazed** and kept saying to one another, ‘What kind of utterance is this? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and out they come!’ ³⁷ And a report about him began to reach every place in the region.

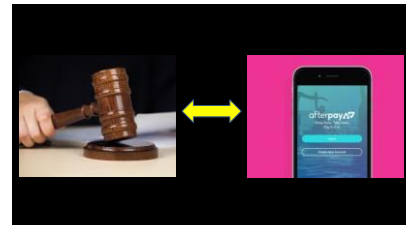
Surveys show that only a **small minority** of Christians believe in miracles in Australia today.³ It’s **understandable** don’t you think? After all...

- In a time of global pandemic, even **televangelists** in America have not been able to stop 2.2 million people from dying worldwide,
- We know of people who’ve been **hurt by false promises** of instant healing at large rallies and church events in the past,
- And then there’s the fact that Jesus and his apostles tells us we will not **escape suffering** or physical death.⁴

While these points above threaten the plausibility of miracles today, they don’t necessarily **discount** the possibility that Jesus’ **performed the works of power reported in the Gospels**. If he is the Son of God, such works of power should not surprise us. Yet our **presuppositions and attitudes about extraordinary claims** will affect our reading of the Bible.

Let me ask where are you **on this spectrum**:

1. On the one extreme, some people have a **predisposition to doubt and reject** anything out of the ordinary, quickly; (e.g. such people dismiss any new claims by Pete Evans or Craig Kelly before they’re even discussed), and
2. On the other extreme, some of us are eager to explore and accept anything **new and fascinating** that might inspire or **add value**; (that’s me whenever Apple makes a new product and promises it will change my life!)



Both extremes have their downfalls and dangers. **Take a moment** to do a **mental audit**. What’s your usual **predisposition** when it comes to new ideas, new claims, new experiences? Do you doubt? Do you jump on?

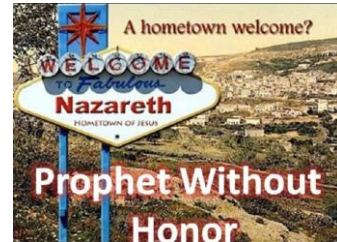
³ E.g. the last National Church Life Survey in Australia

⁴ E.g. 2 Cor. 12:10

Our predisposal towards either harsh judgment or eagerness to explore will **impact** our reading of today's passage.

When we look back to Luke chapter 4, we see the same **two extreme** responses to Jesus' authority and miracles:

1. On the one hand at **Nazareth**, we see the **skeptical**, quick to judge congregation (pictured in Luke 4:22-30).



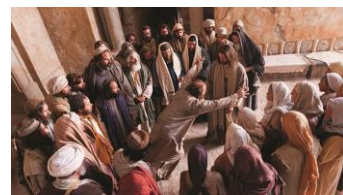
- "Is not this Joseph's son?" they said to each other. They questioned how a mere carpenter's son who grew up among them, so ordinary, could possibly be **divine** as he claimed? They demanded visible proof,⁵ without which they became angry and violent. In-so-doing they missed a **visitation from God** right before their very eyes.

2. The congregation at **Capernaum**, on the other extreme (pictured in Luke 4:31-37), was made up of **early-adopters**.



- Note in **verses 42-44** that ⁴²"At daybreak [Jesus] departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowds were looking for him; and when they reached him, they wanted to **prevent him from leaving** them." The possibility that **miracles** might benefit themselves **mattered** more than Jesus and his mission. They begged him to stay and missed the point of Jesus altogether (see vss. 43-44).

But note verse 34, in a scene dripping with irony, Luke **juxtaposes** these two extreme responses to Jesus with **the only** acknowledgement of Jesus' **true significance** and identity – and it comes from an **agent of evil**.



⁵ Jesus responds to them in verse 23, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" They resembled the proverbial caricature, "Nothing good can come from Nazareth" (see John 1:46)

"Let us alone!" [says the demon through the man] "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, **the Holy One of God.**"⁶

What about your opinion of Jesus?

Luke, the physician (Col. 4:14), must have been intrigued by the eye-witness reports of miracles. But Luke is really asking his reader, "Who do **you** consider Jesus to be and how do **you** regard his mission and vision for humanity?"⁷

Take a **further moment** to ask yourself your presuppositions Jesus and his miracles in the Bible? Are you open to their possibility? Are you open to seeing Jesus as the unique Son of God?

Luke's accounts of the exorcisms and healings are connected **to the mission manifesto** of Jesus back in verses 18-19. **Wholeness and healing**, he is showing us, is an **integral** part of Jesus' mission and his vision for what the Gospel offers to

humanity. Liberation is a theme in verses 31-44 also. For example, the reference to an "unclean" demon that Jesus cast out of the man at the synagogue is not a classification of an evil spirit, but a reference to the man's defiled status in the eyes of his community. This ailment trapped him and he could not participate in the worshipping life of his community freely – not until Jesus released him and freed him. Here is the Nazareth manifesto (see last week's sermon in this series) in action.

Jesus' mission manifesto

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19)

Conclusion

More than ever today, people are **on edge** about health and wholeness. We are worried about mental anguish and we're seeking cures for all ills. What encouragement and insight into the Church's ministry today can we gain from Jesus' miracles?

⁶ "Holy one of God" is a reference to the 'anointed' or Messiah/Christ of God's plans promised in the Prophets. 1 John 3:8 claims that "The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil."

⁷ Luke adds for his readers further evidence of Jesus' divine power in the healing of Simon's mother-in-law (38-39) and the sunset gathering with mass healings and exorcisms (40-41) to test our faith with these signs of God with us in Christ.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann suggested helpfully that...

“Jesus’ healings are not supernatural miracles in a natural world. They are the **only truly** ‘natural’ thing in a world that is unnatural, demonized, and wounded. They are a tangible sign that God is putting the world back to right.”



Perhaps, then, it’s the “non-miraculous” ministries and vocations of healing and wellness today that are the most important **extension of Jesus’ life-giving works** back then.

- **Take the time to be mindful** of and thankful for doctors, surgeons, specialists, nurses, medical researchers, hospital benefits agencies, orderlies, cleaners, PPE manufacturers, aged-care workers, pharmacists, and so many more that make healing, and comfort possible in our communities.⁸ Think especially of supporting those whose work and service helps to **liberate** people who are trapped by their ailments from participating fully in life.
- **Pray for the ministries of chaplains** in hospitals and palliative care, in community and sporting groups and other institutions. It’s an area often under-funded and hidden but is often to the needy that **God is with us**.
- **Pray for** those who are practicing or learning to provide **spiritual direction** and life counsel in our church. It’s another line of ministry that can help our sense of wellness and alignment with God’s vision for life.
- **Investigate** our **wellness hub** on our website. It’s part of our response to Jesus’ vision for wholeness for humanity in the Gospel.
- **Pray** for each other’s wellness. James chapter 5 directs us to mend our relationships and seek help from one another in prayer when we are ill. Consider God the great healer behind all comforts we receive until in the New Heaven and Earth we know wholeness completely.

Matthew adds in his report about the healings at Capernaum⁹ that in performing this ministry of healing, Jesus was **fulfilling the prophecy of**

⁸ Though let’s be careful not to infer that the healing professions are inherently higher callings than other professions.

⁹ Matthew 8:16-17

Isaiah 53:4, “He Himself took our infirmities, and carried away our diseases.”

Notice in Luke 4:40-41 how Jesus entered fully, compassionately, and personally into the sorrows of those He came to serve. His miracles foreshadowed the ultimate healing he came to deliver to humankind in his death for sin when he hung upon the cross at Calvary and rose to new life. He Himself took our infirmities, and carried away our diseases.

Do you believe in miracles? Instead of rejecting the idea of Jesus’ miracles outright, or instead of seeking miracles as the goal in themselves, let’s capture Jesus’ vision of **a world being made whole**, believe that he is indeed God with us, the unique Son of God. In response, let us serve the needs of others in his name and in the power of his Spirit to bring his liberating healing to all people.

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