

Mark 6

Because there seems to be a lot of that stuff going on in the Gospels, not least in today's gospel reading. I think it contains one of my favourite verses from the Bible: Mark 6, verse 5 – He could not do any miracles there – except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them ! Not much of a miracle then! But what do we do with the miracle stories in the bible? The Gospels are full of them. And they play an important role in Jesus' ministry. And sometimes, saying – oh the real miracle is a changed life over the course of the years – bla bla bla. Which is worthy and true and utterly irrelevant to the question of what is going on when Jesus performs these miracles in the Gospels.

Last night in Ely, there was a dance festival. This meant that many hitch hikers lined the country road towards Newmarket, which I drove along early this morning. And a young man and his girlfriend thumbed for a lift, so naturally, I obliged... on the condition that they help me with my sermon.

Well, the girlfriend wasn't much help. I think she must have abused some substance which seemed to have buried her eyeballs somewhere inside her forehead. And after spending most of the short journey trying to convince boyfriend that I was, in fact, a real minister preaching a real sermon in a real church, I eventually got him to define a miracle for me. "It's when God breaks the law of nature – like that girl who survived the plane crash this week." I looked at the girlfriend in the mirror – who was still scanning the inside of her forehead.

If you have been trained as I have, to ask why God did not intervene to help the other 152 passengers, it doesn't sound very convincing. But he seemed to express the 1950s kind of modern view – which says – well, in bible times, people were a bit stupid, but today we know more about how the world works so we don't have to talk about miracles all the time. That's pretty close to the theology of Rudolf Bultmann, which I think has had some influence in our own fellowship in the past. But my passenger's best comment was made as he was thanking me while he let his girlfriend out of the back of the car while she was wrestling with the child locks. "Of course – the real miracle today – has been her keeping quiet for the ten minutes."

Well, in a morning of bizarre coincidences, Radio 4 had some people arguing about miracles this morning. A catholic and an Anglican theologian – arguing it out. But in both cases, miracles were defined as God intervening in nature. God breaking the laws of nature in order to help someone. And, in fact, whether it is charismatic people arguing for miracles, or atheists who argue against miracles – in both cases, the simple point seems to be that there is a law of nature – and one side argues that God can intervene and break the laws of nature, and the other side argues that, of course, this is ridiculous, and even if there is a God, he wouldn't do that! A plague on both your houses.

What on earth are the laws of nature? Who invented them? Where do they come from. Because most of the time, our understanding of what a miracle is, is related to the question of how nature works.

I used to have a cat that lived opposite a farm in Somerset. He was called Hargrave-Silk, built like a panther, a fine hunter. And regularly, he would bring home various forms of wildlife, in order to execute them on his killing platform – where the stairs went around a corner and the only way of easy escape was past him. And occasionally, if I arrived in time, and it looked as though the animal might have survived the ordeal, I would intervene.

But the most surprising occasion to me, was witnessing a mouse that fought back. That reared itself up, and launched itself at the face of this gigantic feline monster. And the cat was hurt, and backed off a little. Now – if they communicated via some cat and mouse, Tom and Jerry, Itchy and Scratchy language – I would love to have heard it. What would the cat say to the mouse? Especially since the mouse was not obeying the so-called ‘law of nature’?

Cat: You can’t do that to me. It’s against the law.

Mouse: What law – what are you talking about.

Cat: You know, against the very law of nature (because, we all know that English cats talk like 1950s BBC presenters)

Mouse: Well, how come I haven’t heard about the law of nature? You’re just making it up – it’s a trick. I’m not falling for that.

Cat: It’s the law of nature – I’m not making it up. Why – without the law of nature, if you turned the kettle on – it would freeze. If you spilt you milk it would land on the ceiling. And in the law of nature – cats eat mice.

Mouse: Oh, I see what you mean. I’m terribly sorry.

But at that moment, an act of human intervention brings salvation for the mouse – although in strict accordance with the law of nature.

The law of nature, is simply the human quest to find consistency and structure in the universe. It is not some absolute law that we will continue to discover as time and technology advance. The law of nature is not something that God sets up, but occasionally breaks when it suits his purpose to demonstrate divine favouritism.

In fact, the bible never uses the word ‘miracle’ – as though the laws of nature were being suspended. Instead, it talks of mighty acts. Not acts which are supernatural. But acts which are mighty. In fact, the bible never talks in terms of natural and supernatural. As though some things belong in the natural world, and some in the supernatural. Instead, the bible uses the language of creation and a creator. And Jesus, as the son of Man, is not some supernatural being – but he is the last Adam – thoroughly human, living as a human is created to live, and performing the mighty acts that a human is created to perform. When Jesus performs his mighty acts, he is doing something utterly natural, and creaturely, and life-changing.

V6

“Jesus wasn’t able to perform many miracles there, just heal a few sick people.” I love that verse, but what do we do with it? The next verse, for me, is even better. That Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith. Hold on. If Jesus were supernatural, then he would not be amazed at anything – because he would already know everything – and he would just be acting surprised. And surely, it’s Jesus’ job to amaze other people! What is Jesus doing getting amazed at people’s lack of faith?

It seems that he couldn’t perform many miracles, because people there didn’t have much faith. Now this is often taken to mean that if no miracle comes, it’s because the potential beneficiary didn’t have enough faith. So if you’re a miracle worker – and no miracle comes to the person to whom you are ministering – you can just blame them and say – well – I would do a miracle but your faith is too weak!

Here – it seems to me – we get to the heart of what is happening with the mighty acts of Jesus. First of all, let's be clear – people in the first century were not stupid. They knew how the world worked. And part of being secure and finding our way in the world, is to develop a world view through which we make sense of everything that happens around us and to us. And for modern people, part of that world view has been called, 'The Law of Nature'. It helps us to feel secure in the universe.

Now faith – here – is not about performing some mental gymnastics to force yourself into believing that God is going to suspend the laws of nature. Faith – it seems to me – is this readiness to experience something that does not fit in with your world view. Something that contradicts the way you understand life, the universe and everything. Now when we do that, the temptation is to say – oh, there is a rational explanation for everything. Which, at one level may be true, but which – at another – is a lazy way of saying that I'm not interested in anything that doesn't fit into my world view. That level of lazy, or cowardly, closed mindedness – is what Jesus seems to be getting at when he talks about a lack of faith.

Jesus, is preaching the Kingdom of God, and that means that he is preaching, and demonstrating, a new way of being human. A fundamentally new way of being human. A way of being human that places the worship of God at the centre of everything. And when that happens, the so called 'laws of nature' are not simply defied. When we live as though Jesus is Lord – we lose the security that comes with our world view, and our laws of nature.

Jesus, calls us, as he called his disciples, to mission. Which is the real point of today's reading. But if we want to squeeze God into our own present worldview – if we want God to obey the laws of nature (or even, to suspend them occasionally), then we demonstrate precisely the lack of faith that amazes him! And wouldn't it be great to be a fellowship of disciples who didn't amaze Jesus – at least in that way!

Caroline story:

We are about to celebrate Holy Communion. A meal, at which, we rehearse a different way of being human. A way that commits us to share in the suffering of the cross. And a way that immerses us in the mighty acts of liberation that God brings to us and our world. And a way that brings us to the point where we experience resurrection life, in all its fullness. If you want God to obey the laws of nature, then this meal is nothing more than some breadcrumbs and thimbles full of red juice.

If we seek our security instead, Jesus Christ, and derive all else, and our worldview and laws and ways of being from this Jesus, - then this meal becomes a means of liberation for us and for our world, because here.