

Fr Tim's Sermon – Sunday 11th February 2024

Sunday next before Lent

Readings:

2 Corinthians 4: 3-6

Mark 9: 2-9

Well if it isn't one child, it is the other!! Last week I shared how Bethany had inspired me and helped me to see the mystery of Jesus Christ. This week it's William's turn. Yesterday, we walked up the hill from Darton to home, and William was full of the subject of his RE lessons this week, which were all to do with modern-day miracles.

He went on to tell me some amazing stories, of incidents which ended in so much a better way than perhaps they should, by the simple rules of science, have ended. The stories were of lives being saved in positions of almost certain tragedy, and of new opportunity being given to those who anybody would have thought would not have any opportunity left.

And then, I got home, and I began to think about writing a sermon. As I read the story of the transfiguration which we've just heard, William's words were ringing in my ears. I began to think about miracles. How do we define miracles? What things have to happen for an event to be called a miracle?

If you think of Jesus' miracles, these are on the whole, events which give new hope or new opportunity to those who had little hope or opportunity. Certainly the healing miracles, of lepers, of people possessed by demons, of people suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years, those who were paralysed, those with withered limbs. These miracles all brought new hope and opportunity to life, and they brought this hope and opportunity into lives which otherwise would not have these things.

So, perhaps a miracle is something which brings new hope and opportunity. But there is more to it than that. These miracles of Jesus have another facet as well. They are unexplainable. Perhaps today we would be able to explain many of the healing miracles of Jesus. Perhaps science and medicine have come on a long way and we could offer an explanation. But, for those who were healed, the doctors had already tried, the experts had not been able to help, and so what Jesus was able to do was a miracle because there was no other explanation.

And so, the miracle begins to grow. It is now something which gives new hope and opportunity but for which there is no scientific explanation available. Perhaps if it feels that miracles are not as present in the world as they once were, that could be because science has come so far, and we understand so much. New hope and opportunity is now brought by doctors, surgeons, and the medical profession as a whole, who perhaps achieve exactly the same healings that Jesus did, but they understand, and can explain, what couldn't once be explained.

So, do miracles still happen? Well, if you had listened to William yesterday lunchtime, you could certainly be forgiven for thinking that they do. He had a raft of stories to relate, of people surviving serious car accidents against all the odds, of babies falling on to train tracks, and coming out from under the train alive. These things do happen, and if you search on Google, there are so many others as well, things which defy logic, things which being hope and opportunity, things which let's face it, shouldn't, scientifically, have happened, and yet, they have.

But we come back to Jesus. And yes, he performed miracles which today we can try to offer an explanation for. But then there were others. Turning water into wine. Well many of us have had a go at that, but it takes quite a long time, quite a few ingredients and a lot of patience. It doesn't happen in a moment. Casting demons into a herd of pigs. Pigs may be animals which have a herd mentality, and if one runs down the hill, the others might all follow, but they're not known to be suicidal, and yet the demons were sent into the pigs, and suicidal they became. And as for the withering of the fig tree, without a strong weedkiller or a chainsaw, most of us would not stand a chance of achieving this.

And so perhaps there are miracles and miracles. Smaller miracles and larger miracles. Real "Wow" moments, and moments which we perhaps only recognise as miracles when we look back at them afterwards.

So, we come to today's Gospel reading. The miracle of the transfiguration. Or, rather than miracle, perhaps I should say, miracles. Jesus took his three closest disciples up the mountain with him. Only those closest to him would see this moment. Only those he could trust the most would have that moment of absolute awe.

And just have another look at what actually happened up the mountain. How many miracles can you count?

First, Jesus was transfigured, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. If we were to be really cynical, the three disciples saw Jesus with the sun behind him, dazzling their own eyes, and all they could see was the dazzling silhouette of Jesus. But being cynical is not a good position to come from. If that were the case, then the story at the foot of the mountain would have been about the beautiful sunshine, not about Jesus being transfigured. Something more, something amazing, happened at the top of the mountain.

The word “transfigured” is defined as being transformed into something more beautiful or elevated. Perhaps Jesus grew, stood taller, was elevated in some way which we will never know, and as his clothes became this brightest of all whites, there was something about his presence. Perhaps if it were anybody else, then those watching might describe this as being like being in the presence of God. But for Peter, James and John, they were in the presence of God, the Word made flesh, and perhaps this is one of the moments when truth began to dawn on them.

But, the miracles continue. Suddenly, there are Moses and Elijah, standing with Jesus and talking to him. Moses represented the law, and Elijah the prophets. We see immediately, language used by Jesus himself, when he gave the greatest commandments – on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Jesus’ ministry is the fulfilment of all that has come before, and the fact that it is Moses and Elijah who stand talking with him really matters.

And still there’s more. There’s the cloud which takes them from view. There’s the voice from the cloud – “This is my son, the beloved, listen to him”. The law and the prophets are fulfilled, and this is where the truth now comes from. Not that the law and the prophets don’t still matter, but Jesus, Son of God, matters more. Listen to him, and you will come to God.

This is where the story reaches its climax. Perhaps it’s good to introduce another man to the story. The great wartime archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, once said that “When I pray, coincidences happen. When I don’t, they don’t”.

We’re not talking about coincidences here, but nonetheless, this is a powerful picture of the reality of prayer. What William Temple noticed, perhaps not surprisingly, is that when he prayed, God answered. When he asked, God gave. When he allowed God into his life, God was only too pleased to be there, and the coincidences were testament to that.

For the three disciples on the mountain top, they were invited to exactly that. They had just seen the most extraordinary thing yet, the transfiguration, the conversation between Jesus, Moses and Elijah, and now, here is that voice, here are those words – This is my Son. Listen to him.

Listen, and you will hear. Give him space in your life, and he will fill it. Walk with him, learn from him, pray to him, and then coincidences will begin to happen. Put yourself in the position of these three disciples. If you had seen this sight, if you had been present in this moment, would you have any choice left than to remain by Jesus’ side?

On Wednesday this week we begin the season of Lent. On Ash Wednesday, we will be challenged again, as we are marked out with ash on our foreheads. We will hear the words “Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ”.

That is the challenge for each of us. Be faithful to Christ. As we watch him take his journey to Jerusalem, to torture, to suffering, and to crucifixion, can we remain faithful? Can we be faithful to a man who hangs, lifeless on the cross, in the same way we would to a man who was transfigured on the mountain top?

I would argue that yes, we can, because of the Resurrection. Only by travelling with Jesus through Lent, can we come to Easter, but that is what waits for us. Easter. The Paschal Feast. The knowledge that Jesus is alive and reigns, that the law and the prophets are fulfilled, that evil and suffering is overcome.

This man, Jesus, has achieved all this, and we are called again today by God the Father, to notice, to hear, and to listen to him. This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.