

BIBLE READING: Matthew 14:13-21

SERMON

For many modern people, one of the biggest stumbling blocks to belief in Jesus is that he was a wonder-worker or a performer of miracles. As a culture, we do not take it for granted that miraculous powers are at work around us. We are deeply suspicious of events that seem to require explanations which transcend the so-called, "laws of nature." The miracle stories seem to go against our sense of what is possible. In response, we tend to do one of several things.

Some people choose to ignore the stories about Jesus doing miracles. They think this belief of Jesus being a wonder-maker probably got into the bible because it was written by superstitious and primitive people with no real understanding of how the world works. At the other extreme, fundamentalist Christians tend to make belief in the miracles of Jesus a measurement of faith. They insist that the miracles occurred just as they are written and accuse anyone who doubts of not believing in God.

More liberal Christians take a third approach. While they do not ignore the stories they interpret them in a way which does not violate their expectations of what is possible.

For example, the parting of the Red Sea during the story of the Exodus becomes a strong wind revealing a sand bar. The story before us today becomes a story about generosity. The willingness of someone to share prompts everyone else to share what they had been hiding and the story becomes a marvellous example of how everyone would have enough if only we got along. Not a bad teaching, I'm all for generosity, but is it really what the miracle is about?

Today I want to explore how our modern world view affects how we understand what the bible tells us. Most of us carry in our heads an idea of the way the world works. We don't think about it much; we simply assume that that is the way things are. The world view for most of us arose first in the seventeenth century in Europe with the "Enlightenment". It has dominated the 20th and now the 21st Centuries. It has many aspects but you'll recognise it as I talk about it. What is "real" is what is material. So, for example, we might say that this building is "real" but that love is "just" an emotion. Did you hear that, "just an emotion?"

We believe that, at its most basic, the world is made up of matter and energy. What is "real" operates within the so-called "natural laws" of cause and effect. The modern world view is very one-dimensional. It reduces life and reality to what is material.

The modern world view identifies truth with facts. So, for example, many people find it difficult to accept that the Creation stories in the book of Genesis can be true in any way, if the events they outline don't conform to what we think of as the way the world came into being.

Listen to the hierarchy of conviction that we use: in our minds, "I can prove" is more certain than "I know" which is more certain than "I believe". We are the first culture in history to do that. We are the first culture in human history to so totally identify what is true with what is factual. Our society is made up of "fact fundamentalists" (Huston Smith). It infects the church too. Christian fundamentalists insist that everything in the bible must be factual, everything must have occurred exactly as it is written, in order for it to be true. The opposite end of the spectrum assumes that much of what is recorded in the bible is so extreme that the best we can do is extract a few "general facts" from the superstition and fairy tales. The rest of us are caught in the middle.

The stories in our Bible, these parts of the record of the life of Jesus, leave us troubled. We're not sure what to do with them. Can we believe them? And, if we believe them, what do they tell us about the way in which the world truly works, as opposed to the way we think it works?

Personally, I don't have a lot of time for the position which says, "you must believe," in order to call yourself a Christian. I've never thought much of compulsion as a means of fostering sincere, life-giving belief. As far as I'm concerned, the very question, "do I have to believe that?" is the wrong question. It seems to set up a situation where we all know that the miracles are on the level of fairy tales. But, just because they're in the Bible, we have to do some sort of mental gymnastics, we have to trick ourselves or blackmail ourselves into believing. So we create this little bubble called religion where everything else that we believe about the way the world works doesn't apply. That becomes the price of admission to the family called "Christian." Is that a useful path to follow? I don't think so. I'm inclined to agree with Galileo when he said: "God who gave me a brain does not expect me to turn it off when I enter the church."

On the other hand, doubting the miracle stories do not necessarily mean doubting God. Listen carefully. We're not talking about what God can do.

We're talking about whether the power of God, working through a human being, is limited in some way. Take a clearly fictitious example. St. Denis, a third century bishop of Paris was martyred by the Romans. The story is that, after his beheading, he picked up his head and walked several kilometres to his church where he sang the mass. Do such things happen? To question the truth of that story does not question the power of God. It does remind us that there is a difference between a creative fiction of the inventive mind and accounts which have a wide base of historical support, such as the miracle stories of Jesus.

So how do we come to terms with the miracle stories of Jesus? Instead of looking at the stories and expecting them to conform to the way in which we view the world, let's look at ourselves. No other culture in human history has assumed that truth can be determined solely by what can be seen, felt, tasted, measured. Instead of questioning the miracle stories, let's think for a moment about the way we look at life. Can the miracle stories help us move beyond the "modern" view of life which has dominated modern history, a view of life with which we have all grown up?

Now, let me be clear. I am no Luddite. The Luddites were a group of people who, at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in England, went around smashing factory machinery because they saw it as a threat to their way of life. I'm not suggesting we go backwards. I'm a thoroughly modern creature. I am a living, breathing, testament to the effectiveness of modern medicine. I do much of my work on computers or with books created by entirely modern means. The sort of work, research and development that the modern view of the world has created, has enriched my life immensely. I have no desire to live in the 15th century.

But, all is not rosy. We are not a healthy society. Doctors and ministers and other helping professionals spend countless hours helping people deal with issues directly related to our modern lifestyle. It's suggested that as much as 75% of the conditions which your family doctor encounters are directly related to our society. Stress, heart problems, obesity, different forms of cancers, depression, anxiety - the list goes on and on. Being "modern" is not always what it's cracked up to be. How does that relate to the feeding of the 5,000?

We might like to think that it's enough to believe that the miracle stories are purely symbolic and that their importance for our lives is found in a truth which is somehow not literal or actual. But that's the modern mind at work in us. To say something is symbolic, to many of

us, means that even if it is important, it's not real or serious. But we can't stop there. For the tradition of Jesus of Nazareth, the living, breathing, individual of some twenty centuries ago - the tradition is very strong that he was a wonder worker. Despite the difficulties such stories cause for the modern mind it is virtually indisputable, historically, that Jesus performed miracles. Particularly miracles of healing and exorcism, but other miracles as well. The earliest sources about Jesus' life agree on this. Even his enemies didn't dispute it - they merely said his power came from Satan. What can we do with that?

Well, we can start by being honest. Despite what our modern world view would tell us, we simply do not know what the limitations of a charismatic, spirit-filled person, are. Perhaps it is possible to resuscitate genuinely dead people. Just because there are symbolic elements in the story doesn't make it false. For example, just because there's a story about Moses feeding the people in the wilderness and the feeding of the 5,000 looks similar to that story - that doesn't mean that Jesus didn't feed the multitude.

It is clear that such miracles, were not unique to Jesus. Difficult as it may be for the modern mind to take on, the historical fact is that Jesus stood in a tradition of spirit-filled wonder-workers. He was the most forceful example. He also told his followers to continue to perform miracles. Peter and Paul were, amongst other things, quite clearly charismatic, wonder-working, holy men.

The modern world-view is one-dimensional. The experience of spirit-filled people like Jesus and others suggests to us that there is more to life than that. In addition to the discernible world of ordinary experience, there is a non-material level of reality, which actually exists even though non-material, charged with energy and power. This other reality is not "somewhere else." It is all around us and we are in it. One of the places where we see this other level of reality is in the over 100 experiments done in "good science" which indicate that prayer can bring about significant changes in a variety of living beings.

Previously, I indicated that I thought the question, "what must I believe" was the wrong question. I think it's much more important to ask the question, "what may I believe"? Because of God's grace active in our lives, what may we believe? Can we believe that there is more to us than simply the sum of a few ordinary chemicals and a lot of water? Can we believe that our worth as a person is more than which model of car we drive? Can we believe that there's more to our relationships than which shampoo we use? Can we believe that there is more to our lives than purely economic self-interest? Can we believe that those things which are non-tangible but which seem so real, do exist as something more than psychological disorders - things like love, like faith, like compassion? In short, can we pass through the modern mind set which has created riches for our life as well as untold burdens; can we move through that and see the world more clearly, more as it really is, more than the modern world view will ever see?

So often, both with the miracle stories and throughout the gospel, we try to change Jesus in order not to be scandalised by him. I think the more useful effort is to see how we limited, violent, modern people can follow Jesus and to have our lives changed by him? Instead of being all wrapped up in what we can or cannot believe about Jesus, why not accept his challenge to open our eyes to a wider, subtler, more spirit-filled and more faithful view of reality than the one that currently possesses us?