

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹

The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twelfth Verse of the twelfth Chapter of the Wisdom of Solomon.⁴

“... For who shall say, What hast thou done? or who shall withstand thy judgment? or who shall accuse thee for the nations that perish, whom thou made? or who shall come to stand against thee, to be revenged for the unrighteous men? For neither is there any God but thou that careth for all, to whom thou mightest shew [SHOW] that thy judgment is not unright. Neither shall king or tyrant be able to set his face against thee for any whom thou hast punished. Forsomuch then as thou art righteous thyself, thou orderest all things righteously: thinking it not agreeable with thy power to condemn him that hath not deserved to be punished. For thy power is the beginning of righteousness, and because thou art the Lord of all, it maketh thee to be gracious unto all. For when men will not believe that thou art of a full power, thou shewest [SHOW-est] thy strength, and among them that know it thou makest their boldness manifest. But thou, mastering thy power, judgest with equity, and orderest us with great favour: for thou mayest use power when thou wilt. But by such works hast thou taught thy people that the just man should be merciful, and hast made thy children to be of a good hope that thou givest repentance for sins.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.⁵

“And he entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his own city. And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemeth. And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and

walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith [SETH] he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. And he arose, and departed to his house. But when the multitudes saw it, they marvelled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “*Jesus, seeing their faith, said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemeth. And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. And he arose, and departed to his house.*”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

Have you ever considered what is the greatest miracle?

Our Lord is credited with performing numerous miracles during His ministry on Earth, ranging from changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana⁷ to healing various illness and disabilities, to quieting raging storms. But which of these miracles was the greatest?

Of course, it is probably fair to suggest that, for the people directly affected by Jesus’ actions, the particular miracle they witnessed or by which they were touched directly was the “greatest”, if only because of its effect on them personally.

Jesus is credited with numerous healings, from the curing of the son of the nobleman who begged for His help⁸, to healing the dangerous fever of St. Peter’s mother-in-law,⁹ to the curing a man of dropsy,¹⁰ of

which we read about in last week's Gospel. These are only a few of the many healings credited to Jesus.

Additionally, He quieted storms that threatened to sink the boats in which His disciples were sailing¹¹ and so demonstrated His authority and power over nature itself. Twice Jesus fed huge crowds of people with only meager resources, a few fish and loaves of bread, to the utter amazement of both the crowds and His disciples.¹² Too, He caused the nets of the fishermen among His disciples to be filled to the breaking point with fish.¹³

Is any one of these the greatest miracle? Could any of these be said to be the greatest thing Jesus ever did? How about raising the poor widow of Nain's son from the dead?¹⁴ Perhaps raising Lazarus from the dead?¹⁵ Are either of these His greatest miracle?

Just what is a miracle, anyway? Is it just some slight-of-hand trick that we don't understand? Or maybe it is simply the performance of a deed which seems beyond our usual power to achieve? We refer sometimes, after all, to the "miracle on ice" in reference to the achievements of the U.S. Hockey team in beating the Russian team in 1980. But if this is so, then a miracle is only something we do not comprehend through our usual means of understanding.

No, a miracle is much more than that. After all, there is much we do not understand. Simply being beyond our ability to figure it out doesn't qualify something as a miracle. If all it took for something to be a miracle was that we did not understand it, there would be no end of miracles.

Maybe a miracle is called that because the chance of its happening is statistically miniscule. We might well argue, for instance, that it would now take a miracle for the New Orleans Saints football team to get into the playoffs this year. We are told every day or so that no team that started this poorly in the season has made it to the playoffs.

But, again, no, that still seems too easy. So-called "Century Plants" only bloom every hundred years or so but that does not make

their blooming a miracle, only infrequent. No, there seems to be more to a miracle than that.

Another factor is that miracles have tremendous impact on the people who witness them, or are touched by them. This is certainly true, but then, many things that are not miracles also seem to hold that distinction. Great tragedies, for instance, have great impact on those they touch. All those who witnessed the events of 9/11, for instance – even those who saw it unfold only on television – are forever changed by the sight of those aircraft hitting the buildings, the confusion, death and bravery of those who fought to save others. Yet no one but a madman would consider the events of 9/11 to be a miracle.

Perhaps a formal definition would help. The dictionary offers this: a miracle is “*an effect or extraordinary event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers and is ascribed to a supernatural cause.*”¹⁶

We may be getting closer, but I think there are still problems here. An “*event in the physical world ... ascribed to a supernatural cause.*” That would seem to imply that any act we do not understand, which we then in our ignorance ascribe to some supernatural power, is a miracle. But surely if our ignorance is all that is necessary, then no miracle is involved.

No, I think the primary defining character of a miracle is being left out. It is as if, when writing down the recipe for an apple pie, the author left out any mention that you need apples to make the pie. You might end up with something attractive, and maybe even sweet, but an apple pie will never come from a collection of ingredients which excludes apples. The apple is absolutely necessary for an apple pie to be the result.

What makes a miracle a miracle is that it involves the interaction of the Earthly world and the divine. Miracles occur when God wills them to. God is the prime ingredient of a miracle and no miracle can exist without God. Miracles are miracles specifically because they involve God.

So, to return to the question where all of this started, what is Jesus' greatest miracle? He told us what it is in the Second Lesson for today: "*But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith [SETH] he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house.*"¹⁷

Consider what happened. Jesus encountered a sick man, who had what is described here as "palsy" and elsewhere as paralysis. This man was, no doubt, reduced to begging for sustenance. Perhaps Jesus knew that he had been a grave sinner in the past, or perhaps his sins were no more or less than those of others. It does not matter because all men and women are sinners, none of us able to save ourselves by our own unaided efforts, so we know that this man's moral standing was no more than and no less than ours.

But Jesus did not waste time curing the physical illness without addressing the spiritual illness first. This tells us which is more important and brings into play both the Earthly world and the spiritual world at the same time. "*Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee.*" In other words, You can be happy now, your sins are forgiven. All else can now be restored to normal because you are now right spiritually. Regardless of Earthly circumstances, you are right in heaven.

Why is it that the scribes objected to Jesus' saying this? It is because if in fact Jesus could forgive sin, then His being God could no longer be questioned, for only God can forgive sins. Jesus went further and showed that the palsied man was also physically cured in order to prove this to the scribes and the crowd. But it was the forgiveness of sin that was, and is, primary; this is what Jesus signaled by pronouncing the forgiveness of the palsied man's sins before He pronounced that man's healing from his physical ailment.

This then, is the greatest miracle. This is why Jesus came to Earth to live and die as one of us. This is why the Crucifixion and the Resurrection had to happen. "*Thy sins be forgiven thee*", an act only God can perform, and that is what makes a true miracle.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord, forgive us our sins. Be present in the world with us to guide us, lead us and strengthen us. Keep us mindful always of our sins, and of the greatest miracle of all, Your merciful forgiveness of those sins. This we pray of Your loving kindness. Amen.

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The Rev. Mr. Larry Wagoner, MSW¹⁸
October 14, 2012

¹ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” Concerning the Service of the Church, *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity, 2012.

³ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* xxxvii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁴ *Wisdom 12:12-19* (KJV).

⁵ *St. Matthew 9:1-8* (KJV).

⁶ *St. Matthew 9:2-7* (RSV).

⁷ *St. John 2:1-11* (RSV).

⁸ *St. John 4:46-53* (RSV).

⁹ *St. Mark 1:30-31* (RSV).

¹⁰ *St. Luke 14:1-4* (RSV).

¹¹ *St. Matthew 8:23-27* (RSV).

¹² *St. Matthew 14:15-21, 15:32-39* (RSV).

¹³ *St. Luke 5:1-11* (RSV); *St. John 21:1-14* (RSV).

¹⁴ *St. Luke 7:11-18* (RSV).

¹⁵ *St. John 11:1-46* (RSV).

¹⁶ From *dictionary.com*, s.v. “miracle”.

¹⁷ *St. Matthew 9:6* (RSV).

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