

## CHAPTER NINE: JESUS' MIRACLES

If we believe with the author of the Letter to the Hebrews that 'Jesus had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect' (Hebrews 2:17), what are we to make of Jesus' miracles? Is he like us in this? In this respect are we unlike him?

When we call something a 'miracle' we are saying two things: it arouses wonder, and we cannot explain it. The surprise of a miracle alerts us to something that is ever present but which our achieved knowledge can obscure: namely, that it is the initiative of God (the ultimately mysterious) to which we are responding in everything we do and seek to do. It is our longing for communion with God that is the mainspring of our desire to know and love.

If we think of God as an object, we think of God intervening, sometimes in response to our prayer, and demonstrating God's presence and action in the world by setting aside what we have come to speak of as the 'laws of nature'. There are two things wrong with this thinking. The first is that when we speak of the so-called 'laws of nature' we can forget that they are only models that we construct to describe what we experience. They do not claim to exhaust the dynamism of nature or the relationships, processes, and causal inter-connectedness of the natural world. The second is that God is not intervening from outside, but is constantly present and active in creation. It is up to us to be open to God's presence and action. When we are, wonderful things can happen. It is a matter of our being open to welcome God's action in our lives, not hoping and waiting for God to intervene. Jesus revealed God as Self-giving Love. Creation is an explosion of this Self-giving love.

Since God is Love, a person who is open to this love and welcomes it can provide for others a space in which they can experience love. If they welcome it there is no limit to what divine love can bring about in their lives, a love that can heal mind and heart and body. We should not be surprised at the effect someone as pure and loving as Jesus can have on those who are open to welcome love. Furthermore, Jesus asked his disciples to love others with his love. There is no reason to think that the miracles that occurred when people encountered Jesus should set him apart from us. He is showing what can happen when anyone is open to welcome God's love into his or her life.

On one occasion when Jesus brought healing and peace to a person whose psyche was broken, the Pharisees accused him of acting with the power given him by the prince of demons. Jesus responded: 'If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own exorcists cast them out?' (Matthew 12:27). Obviously Jesus was not the only one who brought healing. In fact there are people with special powers of healing in every culture. What stands out in Jesus' case is that his healing flowed from the purity and power of his love.

We become what we are called to be to the extent that we love, to the extent that, like Jesus, we 'participate in the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4). There is more to the matter than this, as we will see when we examine the miracles recounted in the Gospels, but this is the key consideration. Paul writes: 'Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). Miracles show what love can do when we welcome it.

We are called to share Jesus' communion with God, and, loving with his love, we are called to love others, thereby offering them the space where they can be open to God's life-giving, healing love. As Jesus said: 'The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these' (John 14:12). Paul writes: 'God supplies you with the Spirit and works miracles among you by your believing what you heard' (Galatians 3:5). Paul includes miracles among the manifestations of the Spirit given us for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:10). 'We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this miraculous power belongs to God and does not come from us' (2 Corinthians 4:7). 'The Lord said to me: My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of the Messiah may dwell in me' (2 Corinthians 12:9).

There is something else that we must note before we come to reflect on the Gospel accounts. In 1984 the Pontifical Biblical Commission wrote the following: 'The Gospel traditions were gathered and gradually committed to writing in the light of Easter, until at length they took a fixed form in four booklets. These booklets do not simply contain things 'that Jesus began to do and teach' (Acts 1:1); they also present theological interpretations of such things. In these booklets, then, one must learn to look for the Christology of each evangelist ... Authors whose writings are preserved in the New Testament have interpreted the deeds and sayings of Jesus in diverse ways' (*Theological Interpretations in the Gospel Traditions: Scripture and Christology* 2.2.2.2.b).

The gospels are a record of what Jesus said and did, but they are also texts that express the understanding of Jesus that the Gospel writers set out to convey to their readers. To do this they frequently draw on imagery contained in the Hebrew Scriptures. They do this to link what Jesus does with the rich traditions contained in the Scriptures. They want to portray Jesus as the new Moses and the promised Messiah. They also use all the resources of rhetoric, poetry and drama available to them. The Gospels are not snapshots of Jesus' life. They are portraits that use language that expresses the faith and love of the Christian communities, for they want to attract their readers to embrace Jesus and share his communion with God.

#### Miracles of healing

Paul writes: 'God was in Jesus, his Messiah, reconciling the world to God' (2 Corinthians 5:19), initiating what Paul dares to call 'a new creation' (Romans 8:19), a new sinless way of expressing the yearning of creation for communion with God.

The Gospels are full of accounts of people being healed. So intimate is Jesus' communion with God and so beautiful is the love with which he embraces everyone, that people find their hearts open to want to welcome his love and so share his communion. The effect of this openness is that they experience healing in their mind, heart and body.

In his account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry Matthew gives us the following summary statement: 'The people brought to Jesus all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, those possessed by demons, epileptics and those who were paralyzed, and he cured them' (Matthew 4:24). Luke writes: 'They were all trying to touch Jesus, for power came out from him and healed them' (Luke 6:19). 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the

Holy Spirit and with power; and he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him' (Acts 10:38). At the first Pentecost Peter speaks to the crowd about 'Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with miracles, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you' (Acts 2:22).

There is no doubt that it is God, the source of our being, who is doing the healing. Such was Jesus' presence and love that people were encouraged to open their hearts to God dwelling in them and gracing them to 'live and live to the full' (John 10:10). Their 'faith' opened them to healing.

Miracles of healing do not set Jesus apart from us. On the contrary, Jesus wanted to share with his disciples the healing power he experienced, a power that he believed was flowing from his communion with God. He encouraged them to open themselves to the kind of intimacy he experienced and to share in his generous loving of others so that they, like him, would be able to attract the sick to believe in God's love for them and find healing. Matthew writes (10:1, 6-7): 'Jesus summoned the twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every illness ... Jesus sent them on mission: 'As you go proclaim the good news: The kingdom of heaven has come near. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons'.

Jesus' contemporaries thought of sickness as being due to the influence of 'spirits' or 'demons'. This thinking was widespread in the first century Mediterranean world, and beyond. The word 'demon' was used especially in the case of people experiencing extreme irrational feelings or suffering from a sickness that affected their psyche. A demon is also referred to as an 'unclean spirit' (Mark 1:23), or 'the spirit of an unclean demon' (Luke 4:33). The gospels speak of 'Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons' (Mark 3:22-23). The mind-set is complicated by reference to devils. In the wilderness Jesus encounters 'Satan' (Mark 1:13). Matthew calls him 'the tempter' (Matthew 4:3) and the 'devil' (Matthew 4:5; see Acts 10:38). This is a complex area due to the many influences that came to Judah especially from Persia and Greece.

The power to heal extended beyond Jesus' immediate disciples. Luke writes: 'God did extraordinary miracles through Paul' (Acts 19:11). Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth: 'The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works' (2 Corinthians 12:12). To the Christians in Rome he writes: 'I will not venture to speak of anything except what the Messiah has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God' (Romans 15:18-19). Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. We are all invited to cling to the vine, and so to share Jesus' intimacy with God and Jesus' love. A fruit of this love is miraculous healing.

Peter speaks of 'Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with miracles, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know' (Acts 2:22). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews states: 'God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will' (Hebrews 2:4). Let us watch Jesus.

\* A psychically disturbed man finds healing (Mark 1:21-27; Luke 4:31-37). Jesus is in the synagogue in Capernaum. Also present is a man who is described as having 'an unclean spirit'. We are told that they were astounded at Jesus' teaching. In a separate episode recorded in the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple we read what happened when the Pharisees sent the temple police to arrest Jesus. The police return without Jesus and when they are challenged they say: 'never has anyone spoken like this' (John 7:46). We are not given the content of Jesus' words in the synagogue. No doubt it was what came to be called the 'good news'. Hearing Jesus speak so beautifully of God's love and seeing Jesus witnessing to this love by his manner, the disturbed man experiences a profound peace and healing. We should not be surprised at the healing that flows from what Jesus understood as his intimate communion with God.

\* Peter's mother-in-law is healed from a fever (Mark 1:29-31; Matthew 8:14-15; Luke 4:38-39). Mark writes that Jesus 'took her by the hand and lifted her up'. Luke adds that 'Jesus rebuked the fever' (Luke 4:39), implying that her sickness was brought about by a 'spirit' or 'demon'. Jesus' presence and his touch is enough to cause her to recover from the fever and experience the joy of being able to offer hospitality to Jesus and his disciples. The episodes recorded in the gospels are chosen for the light they throw on Jesus' ministry and how it affected people. In this scene we find the word 'serve' (*diakonein*), a word used throughout the New Testament to refer to 'ministry'. There is more to healing than making people feel physically well. It is about living to the full, and this includes giving oneself to others in love. Peter's mother-in-law is the first person in the Gospel who witnesses to this; the first 'deacon'.

\* 'That evening, at sundown ... Jesus cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons' (Mark 1:32, 34). Jesus' presence and the power of his love invites people to believe in God's desire to offer them healing of body and mind. Immediately after this scene the Gospels focus on Jesus' prayer (Mark 1:35-39; Luke 42-44). The gospel-writers do not want us to forget that everything Jesus was, everything he said, and everything he did, including healing, flowed from his communion with God and his commitment to follow the inspiration of God's Spirit.

\* Mark concludes his first chapter with an account of Jesus' healing a man whose condition excluded him from association with people (Mark 1:40-45; Matthew 8:1-4; Luke 5:12-16). He had some form of virulent skin complaint. It caused fear, for the discoloration of the skin reminded people of death. There must have been something extraordinarily attractive about Jesus for this 'leper' to disobey what everyone took as God's law (see Leviticus 13), and to brave the outrage of the people by approaching Jesus. He must have been confident that Jesus would not reject him and that Jesus' touch would heal him and restore him to the community. We hear him say to Jesus: 'If you want to you can make me clean'. The manuscripts vary in describing Jesus' reaction. Some have him being profoundly moved with anger – presumably for the way we human beings hold on to distorted images of God. Others have him profoundly moved with compassion. Jesus replies: 'Of course I want to. Be made clean'. Imagine the man's feelings when Jesus embraces him. Jesus' love and the man's welcome of this love (what the gospels call 'faith') issues in healing. Jesus paid a price for his action, for he had to suffer being banished from the community for coming into contact with a 'leper' (see Leviticus 5:3). However, such was Jesus' attraction that the people disregarded the law 'and came to Jesus from every quarter' (Mark 1:45).

\* A centurion's servant is healed (Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10; compare John 4:46-53). A centurion approaches Jesus and tells him of his servant who is 'lying at home, paralyzed, in terrible distress' (Matthew 8:6). Jesus was touched by the centurion's love for his servant, and was amazed at the man's 'faith'. He assures him that his servant will recover. Jesus' presence is healing, as is his touch. This scene reminds us that Jesus' word has its own healing power.

\* The healing of a man 'paralyzed' by sin (Mark 2:1-12; Matthew 9:1-8; Luke 5:17-26). Four men bring a paralyzed man to Jesus. From Jesus' response we learn that this is not an ordinary paralysis: 'When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man: Your sins are forgiven' (Mark 2:5). Miracles can happen only where there is faith. God is always present, holding us in existence and gracing us to live a full life in communion with God. We are not praying that God will reveal God's presence by intervening. We are praying that we, and those we love, will be open to whatever love God is offering. Grace is always present. It is effective only when it is welcomed, and sometimes, for reasons that escape us, welcoming of love issues in healing.

Those who witnessed the healing of the paralyzed man 'were all amazed and glorified God'. We are meant to look deeper than to the man's physical state. Jesus could see people's longing for a deeper freedom that could come only through communion with God. It was Jesus' faith, Jesus' love that encouraged them to believe. The man was healed from sin; that is to say, from whatever it was that was hindering the fullness of life that Jesus knew and to which we are all called. When people are open to God God's love flows to them through Jesus. It is God, the One who is the source of our existence, who offers everyone fullness of life, which, as in this scene, includes healing from whatever is a barrier to love.

In a later scene when Jesus comes to Nazareth, we are told: 'Jesus could do no miracle there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. He was amazed at their unbelief' (Mark 6:5). Essential to a miracle is that a person accepts to be drawn into communion with God. When Jesus' authority is challenged he tells the paralyzed man to 'stand up, take your mat and go to your home' (Mark 2:11). As we watch this scene we are moved to pray that we be freed from the paralysis of sin and enabled to take the next step of love.

\* The healing of a man with a withered hand (Mark 3:1-6; Matthew 12:9-14; Luke 6:6-11). Once again we are in a synagogue and it is the Sabbath day. There is a man in the synagogue with a withered hand. It was assumed that this was a punishment from God because of some sin. As always, Jesus is attracted to anyone who is oppressed. Those with hearts that are closed to Jesus are watching him to see whether he will cure the man on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. Jesus risks everything for love and the man is healed. As in every scene in the Gospels, this scene is included because of its symbolic value. We can have a 'withered hand', just as we can be 'paralyzed by sin'. A 'withered hand' impedes action. We cannot do what we know we should do, or what we really want to do. We are assured by this Gospel that Jesus is holding our hand, holding us in God's love. We may not be able to do what we want to do, or what others expect of us, but, like Jesus on the cross, we can always do what God graces us to do, and in the final analysis that is all that matters.

\* A man is healed at the pool of Beth-zatha (John 5:1-9). The man is described as having been ill for thirty-eight years. This was the time the Israelites wandered in the wilderness after leaving the oasis of Kadesh-barnea till they reached Moab (see Deuteronomy 2:14). He

symbolises all of us on our journey to the 'Promised Land'. Jesus asks the man (as he asks us): 'Do you want to be made well?' The man explains why he has remained sick so long and Jesus tells him: 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.' He has been in the wilderness far too long. Jesus wants him, as he wants us, to enter the Promised Land: to enjoy the inheritance God wants for us, to 'live to the full' (John 10:10).

\* A blind man is healed after washing in the pool of Siloam (John 9:7). In this scene, as often in the gospels, blindness symbolizes a need to be enlightened. Enlightenment comes with baptism, symbolized in this story by the water in the pool of Siloam, where he is told to bathe.

\* Jesus brings peace to the tortured mind of a man in the Gentile country east of the lake (Mark 5:1-20; Matthew 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-39). The scene that precedes this portrays Jesus rebuking the wind and calming the sea (see Mark 4:35-41; Matthew 8:23-27; Luke 8:22-25). That scene assures us that, whatever the chaos might be that surrounds us, it cannot take us from God's love. We will look at that scene later.

This scene in the Gentile country focuses on the inner chaos that disturbs our mind and heart. Does this take us from God's love? The man is described as being possessed by a legion of 'unclean spirits'. He is afraid of the power he sees in Jesus, but he knows he wants it, and at the end of the scene we see him sitting with Jesus 'clothed and in his right mind' (Mark 5:15). Internal chaos cannot separate us from the love of God. We need Jesus' love to heal us by enabling us to welcome God's love, which is always present. Whatever our situation we have to stop asking the wrong question: "Why is God allowing this?" Who said God is allowing it? God has given us freedom and people can abuse their freedom by acting against God's will. The real question is: "Where is God in this situation?" and the answer is: "Where there is love, there is God". Whatever our situation, let us look for love, for that is where we will find God. This deranged man found love in Jesus.

\* Not even death can separate us from God's love (Mark 5:21-43; Matthew 9:18-26; Luke 8:40-56). Two events from Jesus' ministry are linked. The first concerns a woman who is experiencing a flow of blood from her body, which is meant to be a vehicle of life, not death. She dares to touch Jesus' garment and Jesus says to her: 'Your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease' (Mark 5:34). The second concerns a young girl who is declared dead. In the presence of his disciples and the girl's parents (Mark 5:37, 40), Jesus takes the girl by the hand and says 'Talitha, cum (Little girl, arise)' (Mark 5:41). Mark is determined to distance Jesus from the charlatans who claimed to heal by using magic formulas. Jesus speaks in Aramaic, his own native tongue and that of the girl.

This scene is demonstrating what Paul declares: 'I am convinced that death cannot separate us from the love of God in the Messiah Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8:38-39). It is not meant to raise our hopes that, when the time comes for us to die, we will be brought back to this life. The Gospel writers are encouraging their communities to trust that the risen Jesus will be there on the other side of death, and that he will take us by the hand and raise us to share his risen life ('arise!'). Paul declares: 'Jesus must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death' (1 Corinthians 15:25-26). 'Death has been swallowed up in victory. 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' (1 Corinthians 15:54-55). Jesus believed that the source of our life is God. We can destroy our life if we

obstinately refuse to welcome God's Presence and action in our lives. But nothing we do can stop God loving us. Like the little girl let us take Jesus' hand as he reaches out to us, and let him share with us his life.

\* Jesus' healing ministry (Mark 6:54-56; Matthew 14:35-36). 'People recognized Jesus, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.'

\* Two blind men are able to see (Matthew 9:27-31). When we compare this with Matthew's account of the two men who were possessed by demons (see Matthew 8:28), and the two blind men later in the Gospel (Matthew 20:13), it is interesting to speculate that Matthew is writing for communities such as that in Antioch that are composed of Jewish and Gentile Christians. Is one of the men representing the Jews and the other the Gentiles? As Matthew presents these scenes is he making the point that communities can be blind as well as individuals?

\* Jesus fulfills in his person what was expected of the Messiah (Matthew 11:5; Luke 7:22). In his response to a question posed by John the Baptist Jesus says: 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised.' Matthew has carefully laid the ground for Jesus' reply. We have seen the blind receiving their sight (9:27-31). We have seen the lame walking (9:2-8). We have seen a leper cleansed (8:2-4), the deaf hearing (9:32-34), and the dead being raised (9:18-26).

We have also heard Jesus send his disciples out to do what we have witnessed Jesus doing. Jesus wants us to be like him in this, and so he shares with us his communion with God: 'Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons' (10:8). Miracles happen because Jesus' presence and love inspire people to get in touch with the longings of their hearts, and so with God. Far from separating Jesus from us, miracles witness to what can happen in anyone's life. We are all graced to share in Jesus' prayer and love, and when we do there is no limit to what prayer and love can make possible.

\* The daughter of a Syro-Phoenician woman is healed (Mark 7:24-30; Matthew 15:21-28). Typical of the thinking of the time her daughter is said to be sick because she has an 'unclean spirit', a 'demon'. In Matthew's account Jesus hesitates to respond to her request because his understanding of God's will is that his mission was 'only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matthew 15:24). He does not act except in response to God's will as it is revealed to him. This is what happens here. Jesus is surprised by her faith and is inspired to say to her: 'Woman, great is your faith; let it be done for you as you wish' (Matthew 15:28). Jesus was always open to the surprise of God's gift.

\* A deaf and dumb man is healed (Mark 7:32-35; Matthew 15:29-31). As in the scene with the twelve-year-old girl, the Gospel writers are keen to demonstrate that Jesus is not a magician, a master of spells. Jesus addresses the man in ordinary everyday Aramaic: 'Ephphatha (Be opened)! (Mark 7:34). 'The crowd were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak' (Mark 7:37).

\* A young man is brought to Jesus, suffering, it seems, from epilepsy (Mark 9:14-29; Matthew 17:14-20; Luke 9:37-43). His father speaks of him having a 'spirit that makes him unable to speak' (Mark 9:17). Jesus' presence and love bring healing to the boy: 'Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand' (Mark 9:27). Here, as in every scene we have watched, our focus is on Jesus' communion with God and his compassionate love. The disciples were unable to help the boy. Jesus explains that there is a direct connection between healing and prayer (Mark 9:29). Jesus' loving presence encouraged the father to open his heart to God present in him and in his son. A miracle of healing flowed from this communion.

\* Sight is restored to a blind man outside Jericho (Mark 10:46-52; Matthew 20:29-34; Luke 18:35-43). The man cannot heal himself and he knows it. He cries out for mercy. He is taken to Jesus who, with profound respect, asks him: 'What do you want me to do for you?' (Mark 10:51). As we reflect on this scene we get in touch with our own need for enlightenment. We saw once, but, like the man in this scene, we need to 'see again'. Something in the tone of Jesus' voice, something in Jesus' presence draws this man into communion with him, and so with God. 'He regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way' (Mark 10:52).

### Conclusion

The Letter to the Hebrews says of Jesus: 'He had to become like us his brothers and sisters in every respect' (Hebrews 4:15). In the previous chapter we looked at what Luke and Matthew were affirming when they spoke of Jesus' mother as a virgin. We questioned the common understanding that Jesus' conception was unlike ours. In this chapter we have argued that the miracles of healing that God worked through Jesus do not separate Jesus from us. God wills miracles of healing to happen through all of us, and that this would happen God draws us to into intimate communion with Jesus, God's Son. At the Last Supper Jesus is quoted as saying: 'Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these' (John 14:12). We have seen what wonderful things happened when people encountered Jesus. We have also seen that they happened because of what flowed out of Jesus' communion with God. Jesus wants everyone to experience this divine communion, and he calls his disciples to so love people that they will get in touch with God and with God's love for them, and find and give healing.

Dramatic portraits expressing the Gospel-writers' insight into the person of Jesus.

If the following scenes are read as factual eye-witness accounts of episodes that took place in Jesus' life and ministry, we would have to question the author of the Letter to the Hebrews when he writes that Jesus 'had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect' (Hebrews 2:17). He goes on to say that Jesus can sympathise with our weaknesses because he has been 'tested in every way that we are, yet without sin' (Hebrews 4:15). We would also have to question the statement from the Council of Chalcedon (451AD) that Jesus' divinity did not alter his humanity. As we have noted a number of times, far from altering his humanity, it was Jesus' divinity (his intimate communion with his Father) which is at the core of his humanity, and it is Jesus' mission to draw us into his divinity so that we can share his Spirit and live, like him, a life of self-giving love, 'in the image of God'.



It is important to look again at the statement, quoted earlier, from the Pontifical Biblical Commission: 'These booklets do not simply contain things "that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1); they also present theological interpretations of such things.' In the portraits on which we are about to meditate the gospel-writers are portraying fundamental aspects of who Jesus is, what he reveals about God, and what it means to be a disciple.

The gospel-writers belong to a story-telling culture. Think of the marvellous stories found in the Book of Exodus. This is something that Jesus was quite at home with, as we see from his use of parables. I am not sure that 'parable' is a good word to describe the following scenes, but they are powerful symbolic stories. The question we are invited to ask is not 'What exactly happened?' but 'Why is the gospel-writer portraying the scene in this way? What is he saying about God, about Jesus, and about us?'

\* Jesus is an icon of God the bridegroom pouring his love into our thirsty hearts (John 2:1-11). The Beloved Disciple begins his account of Jesus' ministry by presenting two contrasting scenes. The second scene, in which we see Jesus clearing the temple, is found in the other gospels at the end of Jesus' public ministry. The Beloved Disciple places it at the beginning, so that he can present a stark contrast with his opening scene – a wedding feast. The central point of the good news goes beyond the Torah, beyond finding our security in a religious system symbolized by the temple. The Beloved Disciple wants us to see God as a Bridegroom. God is Love, and it is Jesus who knows this – in the biblical sense of 'know': he is conscious of being profoundly loved, and he believes that the source of this love is God, the Bridegroom, the Lover of Israel. The ancient covenant, represented by the six water jars, has fulfilled its purpose. We need something more than water. We are thirsty for the 'wine' of the Spirit, and Jesus is ready to begin his ministry ('has not my time now come?'). His ministry is to attract people to open their hearts to the gift of life that God is offering them. Jesus knows this divine love and he wants everyone to know it.

\* Jesus rebukes the wind and calms the sea (Mark 4:35-41; Matthew 8:23-27; Luke 8:22-25). 'On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to his disciple: "Let us go across to the other side". Leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. Jesus was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. They woke him up and said to him: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea: "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" They were filled with great awe and said to one another: "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"'

When Mark composed this dramatic scene the Jewish-Roman war was being waged in Palestine, and Christians in Rome were suffering persecution. Mark is not writing to raise hopes that the persecution will stop. He is calling on his readers not to lose faith in the God who is embracing them when they embrace Jesus. Jesus' prayer in his agony did not stop his being crucified, but it did keep him open to God's love, which was expressed in raising him from the dead. Paul was convinced that 'nothing can separate us from the love of God in the Messiah Jesus' (Romans 8:39). The gospel-writers are assuring us that we need not give way to instinctual fear. Faith inspires us to look beyond our weakness and turn to Jesus, for the risen

(‘awakened’) Jesus is with us. No storm, no external chaos, can separate us from God’s love. God is present to us as we face the storms of life. We have to face them, but we must not forget to call on God whose love is present whatever our situation.

It is clear from the primeval narrative of creation (Genesis 1:2, 6-8) and that of the flood (Genesis 6-9), that the sea was for the Jews a symbol of chaos, and therefore of the evil which tries to resist God’s creative and redeeming action. In the scene before us Jesus is with us as we venture out into the midst of chaos. He is also taking his disciples to the ‘other side’ - the Gentile side, the country thought of as ‘unclean’, at the mercy of evil spirits. The waves are portrayed as hurling themselves against the boat, seeking to destroy Jesus and his disciples. Jesus is clearly unafraid. The same cannot be said of his disciples. Jesus may appear not to hear our cry, but the awakened (risen) Christ is truly caring: the forces of evil cannot take God’s love from us.

Many elements of the story are borrowed from dramatic images found in the Hebrew Scriptures. We are watching the Creator vanquishing the sea monster. Addressing God the psalmist says: ‘You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm’ (Psalm 89:9-10). Jesus ‘rebukes’ the wind – an expression we find in Psalm 104:7 where the word of the Creator God rebukes the waters of chaos and they flee before his command. God also rebukes the waters of the Red Sea (Psalm 106:9).

Again and again in the gospels, we hear Jesus repeating a phrase often found in the Hebrew Scriptures: ‘Do not be afraid!’ (see Mark 5:36; 6:50). It is fear that enslaves us. We may be powerless to prevent the storms that overwhelm us, much as Jesus was powerless to avoid crucifixion. We are not powerless, however, in the way we respond. In this scene we are encouraged to cry out to the One who alone can save us. Whatever might be happening around us and to us, Jesus is with us in the boat. He does care for us. He wants to save us. An appropriate reflection on this scene can be found in the prayer of Jonah, whose lack of faith provoked a storm similar to the one in our gospel narrative: ‘I called to the Lord out of my distress, and ... you heard my voice. You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight ... The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me ... As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you ... Deliverance belongs to the Lord!’ (Jonah 2:2-9; see also Psalm 107:23-30).

The miracles we have reflected on show the healing power of God offered through Jesus’ love to anyone who believes. The storm on the lake encourages us, whatever our situation, to keep believing in the presence of Jesus in our lives. Jesus offers us his trust, his faith, his love, his communion with God. Nothing can take this from us.

\* Jesus feeds the multitude (Mark 6:33 – 7:37; Matthew 14:13-21; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:5-13). Like the scene of the storm, this scene, too, is packed with allusions to the Hebrew Bible, especially the narrative of God feeding the people in the wilderness by sending them the manna (Exodus 16). There are allusions as well to the Christian celebration of the Eucharist. It is a dramatic portrayal of God’s longing to nourish us by the gift of His Son, the ‘bread’ we really need, as we, like the Israelites, journey to the Promised Land.

There must be hundreds of memories lying behind this powerful scene: memories of the many times that Jesus nourished people by his smile, his compassion, his words and his deeds. All his close followers had stories to tell of the miraculous way in which he touched their hearts, fed their deepest hunger and quenched their deepest thirst. And there was no limit to his generosity in providing for them, as there was no limit to the love that he showed to them. He believed that he drew on the Spirit of God in his own ministry, and he shared this Spirit with others 'without measure' (John 3:34).

By the time the gospel was written, Jesus' disciples could also call on their own memories of how Jesus' Spirit, living in them, had worked similar miracles in their lives. This is the point made in the account which concludes with the Twelve having a basket each, full of bread to continue feeding the hungry people (Mark 6:42). Jesus' disciples had found that they too had been God's instruments in miraculous ways, in nurturing people as they journeyed towards God through the desert of this world. Nothing is impossible to God. Our talents, our hands, our hearts, our love, our acts of service can bring sustenance to a hungry world. It is radically important that we know that we do not, of ourselves, have the resources to do this. It is equally important to know that we are not left to ourselves. Jesus, who was with his disciples, is with us. United to him and caught up in his prayer, we too can praise and thank God; we too can mediate Jesus' love to each other.

\* Jesus walks on the sea (Mark 6:45-52; Matthew 14:22-34; John 6:16-21). 'Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray. When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid". Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves. Their hearts were hardened.'

In the Exodus tradition there is a close connection between the giving of the manna and the crossing of the sea. The slaves escape from Egypt across the Red Sea (Exodus 14:15-31) and then are fed by God in the wilderness (Exodus 16). Here the scenes are reversed. It is the nourishment from heaven that makes possible the journey to freedom.

The disciples are in the boat (symbol of the church). Jesus appears not to be with them. He is the resurrected Jesus 'on the mountain' enjoying communion with God. Even though Jesus is no longer with us in the way he was before his death, the gospel-writers use this dramatic story to demonstrate that he is still caring for the community. We will be safe if we do not lose faith in him. This scene focuses on Jesus' divinity: his intimate sharing in God's life. This is clear from the words he uses: 'It is I; do not be afraid'. 'It is I' translates the Greek *ego eimi* (I AM), which is linked in the Greek version of the Old Testament to the Hebrew divine name, YHWH (see Exodus 3:11-15 and Isaiah 43:8-13).

In Jesus we see God walking upon the waters of chaos (Psalm 77:19; Job 9:8; 38:16; Sirach 24:5-6). By the power of God, Jesus is able to master the chaos. The disciples, gripped by fear, anxiety and near-despair, have to learn that they, too, can 'walk on water', they, too, can reach the Promised Land, provided they put their faith in him and not in themselves. How often they would have experienced this while Jesus was living with them and after his death. Jesus remained in prayer, and so, trusting in God, he was able to rise above the persecution and suffering that he endured; he was able to 'walk on the sea'. With him, they could do the same.

This vivid portrayal of the struggling community and the divine Jesus coming to its rescue reminds us of the following passages, taken from the Isaiah scroll: 'Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you' (Isaiah 43:1-2). 'Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord! Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago! ... Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over? So the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads ... The oppressed shall speedily be released; they shall not die and go down to the Pit, nor shall they lack bread. For I am the Lord your God, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar – the Lord of hosts is his name' (Isaiah 51:9-10,14-15).

Jesus comes to them only in the last hours of darkness, just before dawn. The impression one has is that he brings the light with him, as well as enabling them to reach the shore, but only after they have spent the night battling the seas in the dark. There is a divine wisdom in the timing of grace, and it seems that we all must go through a dark night to make us realize that we are totally incapable of reaching our destination on our own, and we are quite incapable, on our own, of letting go and admitting our powerlessness. There seems to be no other way to learn this lesson, except to be made to face the darkness alone. If we are willing to dare this journey in the night, God will not release us from it till our entire being cries out for that release and recognizes that God alone can bring it.

As in previous scenes the purpose of this portrait is to strengthen our faith in Jesus, and so in God. Matthew adds the following scene: 'Peter said: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water". Jesus said: "Come". So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out: "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"' (Matthew 14:28-31). Like Jesus we can 'walk on water', provided we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

\* Death cannot separate us from God's love, and so from life (John 11:1-44). In the last of the dramatic and symbolic presentations of Jesus' ministry given us by the Beloved Disciple Jesus' friend Lazarus dies and is buried. This is not the end of Lazarus's life, for physical death cannot separate us from God, the source of our life. We hear Jesus declare: 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live' (John 11:25). Jesus summons Lazarus: 'Lazarus, come out!' (John 11:43). As with the anecdote of the twelve-year-old girl, so here, we are not being encouraged to hope that we will be restored to this life. Rather, we are being invited to open our hearts to welcome Jesus, knowing that, if we share his life, nothing can separate us from God, the source of our life.