

Talk for Evening Prayer, All Saints' Cottenham with Rampton on Zoom

Miracles – what are they? 1 November 2020, Alison Wedgbury

Readings: Psalm 105:4-6 and Galatians 3:5

Miracles. Do only Christians believe in miracles? Can you define them in just a few words? Can they be explained by 'science', 'medicine', 'psychology' or 'reason'? What do miracles mean in the 21st century? Can any individual declare a 'miracle' at any time, or does it take a department of experts at church headquarters many years to verify it? Over the next few weeks, Cheryl, Sarah and I will talk about various aspects of 'miracles', in the Bible and over time.

In the Church of England, the word 'miracle' is surprisingly rare. As far as I could find out, it comes up only twice and that's in the liturgy for Plough Sunday as the 'miracle' of growth: '*Lord of all creation...You provide seed for sowing, water, light and warmth to bring forth the miracle of growth.*' That's God's '**general**' divine action that applies to the whole of creation. Other examples of 'miracles' happen in a specific time and place. They are God's '**special**' divine action. Sounds simple? Not for theologians! They've been studying this for centuries and they still ponder what miracles are! People of other world faiths also believe in miracles, as signs and wonders of divine power. A definition that covers all bases is that miracles are something that would not have happened without '*the intentional activity of a benevolent supernatural being*'. In religious terms, God made them happen for our benefit.

Many Christians say miracles are a sign of the power of the Holy Spirit and our confidence to call on the name of Jesus. Many believe that miracles depend on God's action through persistent prayer by fellow human beings. And for many Christians, miracles are associated with saints. In the Roman Catholic Church up to the 16th century, saints and miracles were generally confirmed through tradition. After 1531, things became more regulated from Rome. Today, miracles must now be the result of praying to a single saint and a new saint must have at least two miracles officially confirmed. According to today's Miracle Commission at the Vatican, 99% of the miracles that make saints today are medical. A different type of miracle is an example in the Eastern Church. Did you know that every Easter in Jerusalem, at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Russian Orthodox Christians gather to see the centuries-old '*Miracle of the Holy Fire*'? It's a blue flame that grows and moves around the site of Jesus's tomb.

So, one of my other questions was: can miracles be explained by science or other means? Maybe, but it's not so simple. In 2011, I went to a fascinating exhibition in London called '*Miracles and Charms*'. It is important where this free exhibition was held. It was at the Wellcome Collection where research makes connections between science, medicine, life and art. The main part of the 2011 exhibition was of Mexican Miracle Paintings. This folk art combines everyday life and religious faith. Two in particular struck me. In the first, in 1922, Maria Luz Cornejo fell off a roof during the Fiesta of St Sebastian. She called on '*the Holy Virgin of Carmen who saved her from certain death*'. Note that she paints Mary, the infant Jesus and some angels too. In the second, in 1976, the Zapata family '*thank God and St Francis of Assisi for saving our 4 horses and 2 donkeys from equine encephalitis*'.

Now we may be some distance from Russian Orthodox worshippers in Jerusalem and villagers in Mexico. We may use the word 'miracle' only once a year in our Anglican Plough Sunday service. But can we, should we, make judgements about other people's experiences of special miracles? People of faith have always connected with God in different ways, through words, music, images, objects and visions. Angels are important for some, saints are important for some. Prayer is nearly always central.

Here are two quotes to ponder on. In the 20th century, Albert Einstein apparently said: '*There are only two ways to live your life. One: as though nothing is a miracle. The other: as though everything is.*' In around 1436, the mediaeval Christian mystic from Kings Lynn, Margery Kempe, said: '*Patience is more worthy than miracle-working.*' Perhaps we really have to wait and see.