

Understanding Miracles

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.” ~ Mark 18:27

Viewed in a certain way, everything in this world is a miracle. We can begin with the very existence of the planet, earth, which sits in the perfect balance of galactic forces to permit the development of life as we know it. Even the slightest variation in these forces, including the heat, radiation and gravitational force of the sun, could potentially destroy everything.

But then, when we get down to the molecular level, or even just the incredibly intricate systems of the human body, we also find that the complexity of it all practically boggles the mind. And really, isn't this how we think about miracles? – that they basically boggle the mind?

Think of the Lord walking on the water of the Sea of Galilee, instantly healing a woman who had suffered from a bleeding ulcer for 12 years, curing lifelong blindness or leprosy with His spit or a touch of His hand, and of course raising the dead. People have tried all sorts of ways to explain these things, and Thomas Jefferson even famously made up a version of the Gospels in which he simply deleted all the miracles as, presumably, incredible and unnecessary. But if life itself is a miracle, then it's really just a matter of understanding how such things could possibly take place, and of course *that* is a matter of never-ending study. Who in this world, for example, really understands creation, or human consciousness? Sure, scientists know a great deal about how galaxies are formed, but from what? – and in what? Nobody knows! We also have a lot of information about the brain, including cortical and neurological functions, memory and so on, but consciousness itself? Nobody really knows. And the reason, among other things, is that nobody really understands or takes seriously the connection between the spiritual and the natural worlds.

Again, matter, we say, is a form of energy, but then, what is energy and where does it come from? Where does it begin or end? Or is it infinite? Like miracles – or life itself – these are the sorts of things that also boggle the mind.

So where can we start to understand miracles – either those of the Old and New Testament or those of modern times?

One place is in the words of the Lord Himself, “The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.” Why? – Because only God knows how things really work. The context of that statement is important because it's about spiritual life, not natural life, answering the question, “Who, then, can be saved?” But it applies to everything from the inside out, as we will see in the next few minutes.

The fact is that everything in this created universe begins in the spiritual world. That's why we say “this” *corresponds* to “that.” Water, for example, *exists* because truth exists: water corresponds to truth, and all the different *forms* of water correspond to different forms of truth. These things are created to be physical embodiments of spiritual realities, to demonstrate and illustrate the qualities of these realities. We grow accustomed to water, like every other physical thing, having certain reliable properties, but what if God decided one day to make water into wine?

Who says He can't do that? All it would take (if we can put it that way) would be for the *influx* to change, that is, for the *spiritual substance* involved in the creation process to vary so that what was water one minute is wine the next. Of course the implications of this are enormous, as the entire chemistry of the thing would be involved, and if this happened with any kind of regularity it would completely destroy our ability to think reliably about the world around us or to predict the consequences of any action, therefore undermining our freedom *and* our ability to take responsibility for our actions.

So why, in the example of turning water to wine, did the Lord do it at least once? And why did He walk on the water of the sea? The teaching of the New Church is clear that He did it to represent the state or condition of the church (AC 6988:3, 7337, 8364:8), including the spiritual changes taking place in the church because of His presence in the world. Water corresponds to truth in the memory, wine to truth in the understanding. The Lord came into the world to explain and clarify everything about Himself so that people could have a healthy, happy relationship with Him through love and understanding and not just obedience to the letter of His Word. In addition, while we know that miracles tend to compel belief, at least for the short-term, they laid a foundation for the later faith of His disciples, who were strengthened by that faith to spread the knowledge of His life and teaching throughout the ancient world.

In the same way His personal miracles – healing the blind, the deaf, the speechless, the lame, lepers, paralytics and the dead – all represented in a physical way precisely what He was doing for people on the spiritual plane, opening up their inner ability to perceive and respond to His love and wisdom, to come alive spiritually no matter what their outward circumstances.

And the teachings are clear that miracles continue to this day, but they are not “manifest” or obvious as aberrations from natural order. We read,

“Manifest [i.e., open or obvious] miracles have ceased, and miracles have succeeded which are unknown to people, and do not appear except to those to whom the Lord reveals them, for *all contingencies*, which are all in all, in the most general, in the general, in singulars, [and] in most singular things, *are miracles*, but are *invisible and continual*, which inasmuch as manifest miracles should cease, are not obvious, because no [real] faith [is based] on miracles” (SE 2343).

So we have the more general teaching that “miracles do not take place at this day” (AC 4031:2, 5508:3, DP 133, TCR 501, etc.), that is to say, *obvious* miracles; miracles that compel by external means, by changing the ordinary laws of nature.

We also have the explicit teaching that the church today is not *established* as it once was by miracles, but rather by the revelation of the spiritual sense of the Word (Inv. VII). This allows, perhaps, for highly unusual and unexpected things that we could call miracles, but leaves us in freedom to consider matters of faith without compulsion. So, for example, people may say they have been miraculously healed of some disorder, indeed thousands, maybe millions do. But these things don't just happen by some Divine command, or because some charismatic preacher calls down the power of the Lord; they happen as a result of the powerful influence of the Word on a person's thought and will, breaking down the barriers to the healing energy that He is *constantly* providing, and opening the way for relief. Nobody is going to get a new arm or leg as a result of a conversion experience, nor is everyone who gets a heart transplant going to have a conversion

experience, but there can be no doubt about the effect of a person's mental state on the healing of all kinds of illness or disease.

One of the problems with miracles that really are disruptions of the natural order of the universe is that they focus attention on external, physical things. Yes, a religious person will thank God for the event, and may even begin a new, more joyful life as a result. But because the life-changing event was natural and not spiritual the mind will inevitably rest in the natural world – so much so that the *spiritual* level of the mind may actually be closed off, just as if a door were being shut against it (TCR 501, cf. Inv 46, in *Posthumous Theological Works*, vol 1). When that happens it usually doesn't take much in the way of adversity for new doubts to arise and for new challenges to drag the person down. We see this time after time in the Old Testament: miracle after miracle, from Abram to Moses to the Judges, Kings and Prophets, no matter how dramatic the miracle it seems only to have been a few weeks or years until the cycle of disobedience and despair started all over again. And in the New Testament as well, the disciples witnessed or were themselves the subjects of dozens of miracles but none of them was sufficient to make them understand what the Lord was all about or to keep them from betraying Him at His crucifixion.

Why, then, did the Lord do all these things for them? Well, in addition to the point made earlier that these were all *representative* of spiritual changes in the church, there is also the fact that the disciples were simple, naturally-minded men. They really weren't able to go deeper (TCR 501:2), so the Lord had to work with the situation at hand – but always with the promise of greater, more spiritual things to come (John 14:15-18 and 16:12-13). And remember, when they *did* finally come around and dedicate their lives to Him it was because “He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:27), in other words, He explained everything even as He confirmed His eternal love for them despite their betrayals, so that their spiritual minds were opened at last.

Have you ever noticed that the prayers of people who believe in natural miracles tend to focus on life in this world, including worldly needs, worldly blessings and worldly success? They – and we, too, often – thank the Lord for the *things* we need or for physical health and well-being, and then ask the Lord for more of the same – for natural healing, for natural safety and prosperity, for rain or an end to the rain, for heat or an end to the heat, for grocery or rent money, even intervention in the election of certain candidates to public office. But the Lord repeatedly – and insistently – taught that life is more than all these things, indeed He taught that we should *expect* trouble and that we should be willing to lay down our lives for His sake and the Gospel's.

So today, unlike the world into which the Lord was born, and thanks entirely to His work and teaching, we have the capacity to go deeper, to appreciate the significance of spiritual life and to overcome the difficulties we face by addressing our *internal* issues and concerns first, shunning the evils of our selfish and worldly desires, getting a heavenly perspective, and asking the Lord for His *spiritual* love and wisdom. This is particularly so since the Lord's Second Coming in *the Spirit of truth*, and it's no coincidence that science itself and especially the fields of psychology and therapeutic counselling have made such tremendous advances since that time, clearly showing the power of the mind over matter.

Speaking of which, did you know that recent discoveries in the field of addictions have shown that most drugs and behaviors in themselves are actually *not* addictive? – not even heroine or the opioids that are in the news constantly these days. Rather the problem seems to be the human

susceptibility to these addictions, which arises from a sense of deprivation, emptiness, abuse, guilt, powerlessness, low self-esteem or other forms of *internal* stress in a person's life. It's not that a person has no conscience or moral conviction; it's just that the addiction itself somehow seems more rewarding than the effort to deal with the underlying problem.

So the question for all of us is this: what does it really take for us to change? What does it really take for us to let go of our basic selfish, worldly orientation to life and actually "get" that the spiritual life is SO much better and more rewarding? Do we have to "bottom out" in some deep frustration with our natural lives? Do we have to abandon a given way of life in order to make a complete break and start over? Do we have to experience a miracle that "proves" the existence of God, heaven, hell and the other truths of faith?

The teachings we have are clear that none of that will help in the long run. Rather what we need to do is search within, find out what's really troubling us or where we need better direction, and ask the Lord for HIS power to turn our thinking and our feelings around.

Then, having asked, we need to pay attention to His response, which, for the thoughtful person seeking real understanding will lead to some careful reading in the revelation of the spiritual sense of the Word, for this, we read, is *the greatest miracle of all time* (Inv 43). This is the means the Lord has provided for us to *open* the spiritual level of our minds and so to make possible the communication of all the fullness, holiness and power that lies within the literal sense. And when we have access to that we have access to the source of all improvement on every level of our lives, whether it has to do with health, freedom or the pursuit of happiness – not that it can make all our natural problems go away, but it will put them in perspective, which is always the first and most important step. Then if we're willing it can *inform* the decisions we need to make on the natural level, giving us peace and equanimity as we make them.

The spiritual sense of the Word is the means of conjunction of the spiritual world with the natural (SS 62-69), not just in some general, mystical way, but in our personal lives as the inspiration for all the practical things that occupy our thoughts and affections, directing our application to specific goals and relationships.

Sometimes we look at all the volumes of the Writings, particularly the Arcana, and think, "Wow, there's so much, and it's so deep and complicated, it's just too daunting." But that's mainly because we're not accustomed to it – because we don't spend enough time with it. Everything gets easier with practice; the real question is, are we interested? Take any story in Genesis for example, even a story of deceit, rape or murder: what does it tell us about ourselves and our inner life? Is it relevant? Does it matter? YES, of course it does! But if we want to know how, and if we want to get the help and perspective it brings we have to take it seriously, and read and think about it. Then, *miracle of all miracles*, the Lord will be able to reform and regenerate us, without interfering in the least with our own freedom and understanding, in fact, by *enhancing* these faculties in us and giving our lives the deeper meaning and purpose we all need and crave, whether we realize it consciously or not.

Amen.

Lessons: *Genesis* 18:1-15; Children's talk: on the miraculous power of the Lord
Matthew 14:22-33 and *Divine Providence* 130-133: selections