

Hard-earned miracles

2 August 2020

Only those who ache for meaning will pursue it.
Only those who yearn for a deeper life will seek it.
This is a place for those who ache and yearn for something more.

So let us come here today with our hunger and thirst,
our unsatisfied longings, our heart-felt yearnings,
and let the God of life satisfy our souls.

And may the words of my mouth, and the thoughts of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Amen

A bit like most goldfish, I am repeatedly surprised by the infinite number of angles and ideas in each passage of the bible that we read in the lectionary. It really is the gift that keeps on giving ... and so I suppose that the surprising thing is that I'm surprised – and that I keep on being surprised ...

But there you go, that is what it is to be a goldfish!

This reflection is about miracles. I'm sure I've swum around this side of the bowl before ...

This reflection is about miracles, and it is about what we have to do with miracles – that way around – not what miracles have to do with us, but what we have to do with miracles.

I'm not extremely comfortable with miracles. Maybe one reason is because I like to deal with things I understand and can explain – and the whole point of miracles is that they can't be explained, and they don't fit into the natural order of things.

So I suspect that my discomfort with miracles encourages me to discount them as being exclusively something that God does – so I don't really have to concern myself with them. I can deal with the inexplicable but putting it onto God's turf. I don't think that I'm alone in this – we don't naturally think of ourselves as integral to God's miracles. I think we tend to distance ourselves from miracles for all sorts of reasons, maybe preferring to see ourselves as bystanders. We feel we might get a front row seat, if we are lucky, but we see ourselves as no more actively participating in miracles than are fans watching the underdog win the final at Roland Garros or watching our national team beat the All-Blacks...

But our two readings today, the second from Matthew describing the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 and the first from Genesis describing the miracle of the "transformation" of Jacob into Israel, both tell us something about miracles that calls into question whether I am right to feel 'remote' from miracles.

Let's take a closer look - some of you will already be wondering why I called the Genesis reading a story about a miracle. We think of it as the story of Jacob wrestling with God, not as a story about a miracle.

But it is both. The name Jacob means "to follow, to be behind". He was the younger brother of Esau – on whom he played a rather dirty trick so he could steal Esau's birthright as the elder brother. And indeed, another meaning of the name Jacob is "to supplant, circumvent, assail, overreach". Jacob is someone ambitious, and not necessarily ambitious in the right way. He'll do what he needs to do to get his way.

But the name Israel, the name he is given after that rather terrifying night by the Jabbok river, means "to struggle with God" and also "God prevails". There is an indisputably miraculous transformation in someone who goes from thinking about themselves first and foremost, prepared to do anything to come from behind ... to someone who recognises God's presence in his or her actions, and struggles with that. There is a miraculous awakening in someone who realises they have done wrong, done an irreparable wrong, and who turns to face the music.

So our Genesis reading does describe a miracle.

But where I want to get to is Jacob's role in that transformation – in that miracle. What did Jacob do? What was his part in that miracle? Because he certainly wasn't a spectator, was he ? ...

Our reading tells of him wrestling all night with a man. In context, Jacob is preparing for what he thinks will be Esau's last stand with his estranged brother – the brother he last saw just after he stole his birthright, the brother who was always bigger and stronger than Jacob / Israel, the brother who was coming to meet him with 400 men ... But this time it is different. Jacob isn't running away. This culmination is one that Jacob has sought, sending messengers to Esau warning him of Jacob's imminent arrival.

In a nutshell, Jacob took an active role, Jacob engaged with God, yes indeed, Jacob struggled and wrestled, but he was active. He participated ... and then God performed His miracle, miraculously transforming Jacob into Israel.

And this is exactly what Jesus teaches the disciples in the Matthew account of the miracle of the feeding of the 5000.

Look again at that reading we think we know so well. I can see the disciples arriving with their popcorn, their pints of beer, their strawberries and pims or whatever, reading to take a ringside seat to watch Jesus perform his best tricks. They have been with Jesus as He taught all day, and they say to Him as the evening approaches "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." And they might have added "We've found a nice place down the road where we can go for a curry after the match, where we can discuss all that You did while we watched from a safe distance ..."

This does seem quite sensible. The sort of foresightedness one might applaud. But it doesn't show the disciples engaging with the problem, but rather trying to avoid it happening. It is a solution on their terms.

But Jesus calls them out, and places the responsibility squarely back on their shoulders: "you give them something to eat."

Imagine yourself settling in comfortably to watch the match ... and suddenly, the All Blacks need a prop. Or Roger pulls his hamstring and asks you to step in opposite Raphael Nadal.

Jesus calls out the disciples, places the responsibility back on the disciples – and it isn't comfortable for them. Imagine being faced with 5000 hungry and tired people, and knowing that the catering lorry hasn't arrived.

In my sporting example you might say "I'm not good enough" or "I'm not fit enough" or "I haven't played for years" ... or "we only have five loaves and two fish."

But God asks for our engagement, no matter how small, even if it is only five loaves and two fish. Whatever we can bring is enough for Jesus to work with. Having dislocated Jacob's hip, effectively neutralising him, the man might have imagined that he had beaten Jacob, but Jacob hung onto him. It is through that little bit of tenacity that God transformed Jacob into Israel.

Maybe that reveals another reason why I struggle with miracles - let me ask you that difficult question: how much do we really want to get close to God? Think about that for a moment. Jacob was defined by his own craftiness and cunning. He was in control, he played the game on his own terms. It is in many ways easier and safer to do this – you can bail out when it looks like it is going wrong, you can change strategy, you are in control ...

The story of Jacob show that getting close to God comes with consequences. Who wants to be crippled? Who wants to risk trying to feed 5000 people with two loaves and five fishes? Apparently, Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, when asked what she did to get closer to God, responded (pretty characteristically) "What? Nothing! Sounds like a horrible idea to me, trying to get closer to God."

In one sense – in our usual, comfy, under control sense, getting close to God is indeed a bad idea. It might mean getting told to love someone I don't even like, or to give away more of my money. It might mean letting some idea or dream that is dear to me get ripped away. It might mean having to recognise that I have done wrong to a loved one, and that I have lived a lie for 20 years like Jacob. It might mean setting myself up for what seems like certain failure, being made to look like a fool, proposing to feed 5000 tired and hungry people with two loaves and five fishes ...

So I don't really understand miracles, and I don't really want to lose control and risk getting hurt.

But the stories of Jacob and the feeding of the 5000 show us that God uses what we bring to work miracles. So we do have something to do with miracles. But these miracles are never comfortable – not simply because we don't understand them, but also because we are called to participate in what we don't understand. We are called to lose control, and move closer to God. At the risk of damage to our precious self-image, at the risk of loss, of hurt ...

Miracles don't unfold before us from the comfort of a ringside seat, where our popcorn and beer don't risk to get spilled. We have to bring what we have, however little we think that it, we have to swallow hard, step up, cling on ... and then God can work His miracles.

Saint Theresa of Avila said it like this in her famous exhortation:

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

My prayer is that that individually and as a community we can be brave enough to get closer to God. That this summer and always we may all have the opportunity, strength and courage to step out, up, into those difficult situations where we don't understand, where it doesn't make sense ... but where God can work His miracles through us.

Amen