

2. Through Signs and Symbols

Starting Point

What to you is the most iconic symbol in the world, and does it carry any particular message?

Bible Verses

To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues.
(1 Corinthians 12:8-10)

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."
(Matthew 26:26-27)



Question 1

How would you define a miracle?

We began the last session in Genesis, looking at the picture of God calling the universe into being, "And God said...!"

From there we thought about whether that picture of the first humans walking through the Garden and communicating directly with God (being in his presence) was an experience that is still possible in today's world, either within creation or a created place.

Now we look a little at how God's presence is

seem within Scripture through signs, symbols and miracles, and consider what God was saying to his people through the miraculous in the Old and New Testaments and whether these are ways through which God might speak to us today.

So let us begin again with the Creation story, and the first thing that we have to acknowledge is that when these words were written there was no concept of any “laws of nature” that we might now be familiar with – all that happened was seen as a result of the hand of God. We see this reflected so poetically in the words of the Psalm 104, which is actually worth reading in its entirety.

All creatures look to you
to give them their food at the proper time.
When you give it to them,
they gather it up;
when you open your hand,
they are satisfied with good things.
When you hide your face,
they are terrified;
when you take away their breath,
they die and return to the dust.
When you send your Spirit,
they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.
(Psalm 104:27-30)

So there is some disconnect between what we might view as the miraculous (above and beyond the laws of nature) and something which an ancient people looked upon more as an unexpected event or sign from God, memorable enough to be passed on through the generations via an oral and then written history.

As we journey through the Old Testament, signs and wonders become increasingly associated with the story of God’s relationship with an often rebellious people in their epic journey from slavery in Egypt to a promised land, subsequent engagements with the surrounding cultures and time spent in exile in Babylon at the time of Daniel.

In other words, they are linked to God’s plan of salvation and the establishment of his kingdom, initially through a chosen people on earth.

So in the Old Testament the signs and miracles

are in general speaking to us about Salvation and God’s Kingdom, which are still big issues for all of us. It is still possible for stories written several thousands of years ago to speak into our situations today!

Question 2

Can you recall stories from those early years of God’s people that might qualify as signs and wonders?

Signs and wonders in the Old Testament speak to us of God’s power supporting his people, executing judgement on individuals and nations, and in single unexpected events and miracles.

Here’s a few examples:

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt—over the streams and canals, over the ponds and all the reservoirs—and they will turn to blood.’” (Exodus 7:19)

“(Nebuchadnezzar) said, ‘Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.’ Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, ‘Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!’” (Daniel 3:25-26)

“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions...’” (Exodus 16:4ff)

“Remember today that your children were not the

ones who saw and experienced the discipline of the Lord your God: his majesty, his mighty hand, his outstretched arm; the signs he performed and the things he did in the heart of Egypt, both to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his whole country; what he did to the Egyptian army, to its horses and chariots, how he overwhelmed them with the waters of the Red Sea..." (Deuteronomy 11:2-4)

"Ezekiel will be a sign to you; you will do just as he has done. When this happens, you will know that I am the Sovereign Lord." (Ezekiel 24:24-7)

"She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah." (from 1 Kings 17:10-16)

There are of course many more.....!



Moses strikes the rock and out pours water.
(Numbers 20:10,11)

Question 3

The four Gospels also include many miracles. And the writer John presents us with seven, describing them as "miraculous signs" (as in chapter 2:11). Is there a difference between these and the Old Testament miracles?

John's Gospel, written some decades after Jesus' death and resurrection includes seven incidents which we might call miraculous, beginning with Jesus turning water into wine and ending with the raising of Lazarus from the dead - and John calls them "signs" rather than miracles. He also includes seven "I am" statements where Jesus' words help to answer the question, "Who is this man?"

If we put the two together then it is possible to discern not only how Jesus described himself and his purpose, but also how the things he did confirmed the words he said, pointing to God's glory revealed through him - or to quote Nicodemus, who was starting to put the picture together, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." (John 3:2)

Question 4

Nicodemus seems to be at least in part on the right track, but the Jews generally were not, even though they were looking for Messiah to come accompanied by signs and wonders. Why do you think that they might have missed the clues that were speaking to Nicodemus?

In the gospels we see Jesus as the Word, with the writer John connecting him with Creation and God's creative breath. So Jesus speaks with the authority of God, and the signs and wonders that accompanied his work were a consequence of who he was and where there was need - not simply for the purpose of demonstrating his power.

Jesus brought healing and wholeness to those who were in need of it, showed that the Creative Word could still control the elements (Luke 8:22-25) but refused to do tricks to impress Herod (Luke 23:8-9).

So the "signs" or "miracles" within the four gospels speak to us of the power and glory of God present in Jesus' life, and point us towards an understanding of the Kingdom of God both here on earth and in heaven.

They also speak to us about healing and wholeness... and the continuing story of Salvation.

"These things," says John "are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

But the New Testament is more than just the story of Jesus. Paul in his second letter to the Corinthian church tells the fellowship of believers, "I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles."

Question 5

There are signs, wonders and miraculous acts demonstrated in the lives of the disciples and apostles after Pentecost and in the early church. Is there a difference, do you think, between these miracles and those of Jesus?

As we read the book of Acts, we discover that it is the story of a developing church, and the teaching of the apostles begins to take precedence over signs and wonders. It is unclear from the continuing story whether or not the incidence of healings or other miraculous acts continued or decreased during this period. Where they do occur, an important difference must be noted – they are not performed through the authority of the individual but by the power of God's Spirit invested in them by Jesus (Acts 1:8).

Sometimes these were, as with Jesus, acts of blessing and healing. But there were also occasions when God's judgement was dispensed, as with Elymas the sorcerer (Acts 13:6-13).

And we are told most emphatically that the signs and wonders performed in the early church were by no means the same as those performed by others such as the clairvoyant slave girl in Acts 16:16-18.

Question 6

How do we distinguish between signs that have their source with God, and those which do not?

The early Christian apostles were people who in the main were not highly educated, or experienced in public speaking and demonstrations of supernatural power. It was the Word of God that was being heard, and the power of God being shown - through ordinary lives but empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The book is, in a sense, not the Acts of the Apostles, but the acts of Jesus Christ continuing to be seen through his apostles, by his power and with his authority.

"He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own

authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:7-8)

Paul seems to have anticipated that the early Christians would continue to demonstrate the power of God in the lives of believers, ultimately for the building up of the Church.

“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

Through the Old and New Testaments the signs and miracles still speak to us of Salvation and the Kingdom of God. The Epistles speak to us of the continuing power of Jesus post Resurrection, alive within his followers as they carry on his work of establishing God’s Kingdom on earth.

Question 7

So what of signs speaking to us of God’s nature and purpose today? Are we dismissive, sceptical or anticipating?

Within the established church and its different denominations there are various signs and symbols which point us toward aspects of our faith and particularly the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can perhaps consider these as speaking to us, revealing something of the nature of God.

In this context there is the depiction of the Cross displayed on wall or table, icons, paintings or statues, the elements used for Holy Communion, the Bible, sacred songs, anointing with oil or laying on of hands for healing or blessing. In their own

way these remind us, or speak to us about aspects of our spiritual life and its source.

Are these any different than signs (or symbols) seen within the Old Testament, such as the bronze snake lifted high by Moses that spoke to the people of God’s power, and the pillar of cloud which spoke of God’s presence with his people (other than perhaps in scale?)

Question 8

What are the most important symbols in your church, and what do they say to you?

Summing up

Many would argue that the age of the miraculous gradually ended with the establishment of the fledgling church by the apostles. Others refute this and point to healings which appear unexplainable by doctors, and the continuation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:28-31) present within the church. The miraculous, where it occurs in the life of an individual, speaks of God’s eternal power and love, and of a beautiful relationship between the Creator and humankind.

