

There is a marvellous miracle described in Willa Cather's book, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. (1) In the story, Father Junipero and his friend, Father Andro, set out on a journey through a Mexican desert with bread and water for one day. On the second day, they are beginning to lose heart when, near sunset, they see in the distance three very tall cottonwood trees. They rush toward the trees and see a little house. An old Mexican comes out of the house, greets them kindly, and asks them to stay the night. Inside the little house the man's young wife is stirring porridge by the fire. Her young son is beside her playing with a pet lamb. The family shares their supper with the priests, then gives them sheepskins to use for sleeping on the floor. The next morning when they awake, the family is gone, presumably caring for their sheep. Food was set out on the table. The priests eat and continue on their way. When the brothers at the monastery hear Father Junipero's story, they say they know of the place with the three tall cottonwoods, but insist there is no house there. So Father Junipero and Father Andro take some of the brothers and travel back to the place. The three tall trees are there, shedding their cotton, but there is no house and no family. The two priests sink down on their knees and kiss the earth, for they know it was the Holy Family that had entertained them there. Father Junipero recalled how he had bent to bless the child after evening prayers. The little boy had lifted his hand and with a tiny finger had made the sign of the cross on Father Junipero's forehead.

Stories like this can make believers out of skeptics. In the book, those who hear about Father Junipero's miracle develop such an affection for this story that it brings them pleasure for the rest of their days. That's what the story of a miracle does. It strengthens faith through the pleasure of just remembering it.

We could also say that a miracle is one of those times when things get out of control in a good way. God interrupts our orderly existence with something wonderful that doesn't fit our notions of orderliness. We need those moments in our memories for when things go out of control in a bad way. For each one of us, there comes a day when we feel like our lives have been hijacked by bad news. We go along day after day doing our best. We raise our children, take our vitamins, get our exercise, and pay our bills on time. The years go by, and we begin to think that we are in control of our lives, that things will turn out okay. We just need to do our best. Then one day everything changes. The blood test comes back positive for leukaemia. Our son gets arrested for selling drugs. A big investment goes wrong. One moment we feel in control of our lives and in the next we feel trapped inside of a car zooming down a highway with no brakes. There have been times when I have heard others say "I think I have lost control of my life." But you cannot lose something you never really had. They were never really in control. What we lose when things go bad, is the illusion that we were in control.

It's a hard lesson to learn. We humans come with built-in limitations. We cannot walk on the sea. We cannot fly. We cannot undo tragedy. We cannot control what happens to us. What we **can** do is to choose how we will react when the bad times come. The Scriptures gives us some help with that. When Jesus and his disciples are out on the sea and a storm comes up, the disciples are terrified. Jesus is sleeping. They wake him up and scold him for not caring that they are about to die. Jesus gets up and stretches and yawns and says, "You still don't get it, do you? You don't need to be afraid. You just need faith." Or take today's story. Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, falls at Jesus feet. He too is suffering from something he cannot control, the mortal illness of his daughter. "Come and heal my girl," he begs Jesus, "so she can live." Then the worst that can happen happens. Word comes that she is dead. Jesus says to this devastated father, "Don't be afraid. Just have faith."

Only two things: don't be afraid and have faith. This isn't just words for Jairus or for the disciples in the storm. It's words for us. It's words for us when we have our noses smashed up against the things in life we cannot control. We want to control our lives and we'd like to control God. If we controlled God, we could get a miracle when we need one. But these miracle stories are not about control. They are stories about what God is like and how God acts. Mark wrote the stories down so that we would know that Jesus was no ordinary

man. Mark wanted people to have faith so they would have strength to function when things got out of control. Mark wanted them to know that even when Jesus is gone he still has the power to still the storms of our lives and raise us out of a living death to life again. We have two choices. Either we can be afraid or we can have faith. And, of course, it is never that easy but it **is the** challenge of life.

One of the classic ways in which Christians have provided evidence for their faith is through miracles. By looking at prophecies from the Old Testament fulfilled in Christ, or healing and nature miracles, or the resurrection we have tried to show that there is a convergence of signs all pointing to Jesus as the Son of God. However, since the Enlightenment, there has been a strong rejection of miracles by modernism so that it has become necessary to apologise for the introduction of miracles rather than using them for evidence. Post modernists continue to devalue miracles seeing them as merely a perception of truth to the viewer. C. S. Lewis in his book *Miracles* (2) and in essays on the subject sought to clear the ground so that miracles could again be discussed.

One of the factors that brought Lewis to public attention and continue to do so was his confident affirmation of the supernatural—God, demons, miracles, and all. How could a sophisticated Oxford professor believe such things in the twentieth century? When his face appeared on the cover of Time Magazine in 1947, it read, “Oxford’s C. S. Lewis: His Heresy Christianity.” What made Lewis such a “heretic?” Well, he rejected the fashion to lower the bar of belief, minimising the things you really needed to embrace to be a Christian. German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) had reinterpreted the faith so that it could be quite palatable for its “cultured despisers.” Rather than confront their objections, he gave ground so that there would be no obstacles such as miracles to get in the way. Liberalism tends to present Christianity without any miracles. Occasionally someone would accept a really big miracle such as the Resurrection but then deny the virgin birth, turning water into wine, walking on water, feeding the five thousand, and so on. It was important at that time as well as today to ask the question, “Why are miracles rejected without further consideration?”

In his book *Miracles* which I commend you to read C.S. Lewis said that miracles do not cause us to believe so much as believing brings forth miracles. When we believe, we begin to find God in things as ordinary as each other and the world around us. That’s possible even when things are bad. When we give up the illusion of control then we can better see God’s out-of-control grace. Faith is strengthened through the pleasure that comes from remembering the miracle stories. But not just that. When we choose faith over control, we have a much better chance of experiencing those miracles of God’s grace all around us right now. Amen.

Fr Robert Newton

- 1) Willa Cather *Death Comes for the Archbishop* 1927 Penguin Classics
- 2) CS Lewis *Miracles A Preliminary Study* 1947 revised 1960 Fontana Books.