

SIGNS NOT WONDERS: UNDERSTANDING THE MIRACLES OF JESUS AS JESUS UNDERSTOOD THEM

By GEORGE SOARES-PRABHU

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO SPEAK authentically about Jesus without referring to his miracles, because miracles form an indispensable part of the earliest tradition about him. There is a passage (quite old) in the Babylonian Talmud which accuses Jesus of having led Israel astray through sorcery (Sanhedrin 43a); and another (less reliable) which tells us that he brought his spells with him from Egypt, concealed in a cut (Shabbat 104b). Even if these references do not contain independent traditions but are polemic Jewish reactions to the Christian proclamation of Jesus as a miracle-worker, they do tell us how important miracles must have been in the earliest preaching about him. Among the earliest reports about Jesus are the set formulae used in early Christian preaching, which Luke in the Acts of the Apostles has inserted into the missionary sermons he has attributed to Peter and to Paul. In one of these we are told of 'how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; and how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him' (Acts 10,38).

This compact summary is fleshed out in the gospels. Each of these develops the story of Jesus in its own way, but all give importance to his miracles. Even John the maverick Gospel,¹ which describes only seven miracles (and none of them an exorcism!),² treats these miracles as significant. He describes them at considerable length, and provides each with an extensive theological commentary which interprets it as a 'symbol of the new reality' revealed in Jesus.³ The other three Gospels, the Synoptics, which are closer to history and to Jesus' own understanding of his miracles than

John, attribute a much larger number of miracles to him. Jesus heals large crowds of the disabled and the sick (Mt 8,1-9,35). He casts out many demons from people then believed to be possessed by them, but most of whom would be treated to-day (*The exorcist* notwithstanding) as mentally ill (Mk 1,21-28). He raises people from the dead (Mt 5,35-43; Lk 7,11-17). And he works a number of nature miracles, controlling the forces of nature to do extraordinary things like stilling a raging storm (Mk 4,35-41), or walking on the surface of a lake (Mk 6,45-52), or multiplying five loaves of bread to feed five thousand people (Mk 6,35-44), or arranging an impossibly large catch of fish (Lk 5,1-11).

The range of the miracles worked by Jesus is impressive; and the references to them in the gospels are many and varied. Miracle stories, schematic (Mk 1,29-31) or diffuse (Mk 10,46-52) descriptions of particular miracles he worked, alternate with summaries of his ministry which speak in general of his many healings and exorcisms (Mk 1,32-34; 3,7-12; 6,53-56). Occasional sayings of Jesus too refer to his miracles (Mt 12,38-42; Jn 10,38; 14,21), or tell us what Jesus understood them to have meant (Mt 11,2-6; 12,28). The tradition about the miracles of Jesus is ancient, extensive and pluriform. It cannot be easily ignored.

Did Jesus work miracles?

This tradition has of course, like the rest of the Jesus tradition, undergone considerable change, specially when being handed down in the oral tradition of the early Church, before the gospels were written, some forty to seventy years after the death of Jesus. Miracle stories have been re-interpreted (the strongly christological story of the stilling of the storm in Mk 4,35-41 has been given an ecclesiological turn in Mt 8,27-31); some have been re-formulated to teach new lessons (the story of the centurion's boy is told very differently in Mt 8,5-13, Lk 7,1-10 and Jn 4,46-54); others have been duplicated (the two feeding miracles narrated in Mk 6,35-44 and Mk 8,1-11 are probably Jewish and Hellenistic traditions of one and the same story); a few have been created because of linguistic misunderstandings (the story of Jesus walking *on* the sea in Mk 6,48 may have been derived from a story showing Jesus walking *by* the sea as in Jn 21,4, for both expressions translate the same underlying Greek, *epi tēs thalassēs*); and some may even have been adopted from Jewish or Hellenistic folk tales (like the story

of the coin in the fish's mouth in Mk 17,24-28, whose legendary character is obvious).

Yet even allowing for all this it is quite certain that the tradition that Jesus worked miracles of some kind (however we explain them) is substantially true. 'Even when critical methods have been applied with the uttermost seriousness,' writes Joachim Jeremias, a New Testament scholar unrivalled for his competence in the historical study of the gospels, 'a nucleus of tradition still stands out which is firmly associated with the events in the ministry of Jesus.'⁴ Jesus, that is, certainly did heal and exorcize (two ways of saying the same thing, for sicknesses were then believed to be caused by demons). Whether he raised people from the dead (whatever this might mean), or worked the nature miracles attributed to him (which, as narrated in the gospels, have been so heavily touched up that it is quite impossible to say now what exactly happened) is doubtful.

However that be, the large part that miracles play in the early Christian presentation of Jesus makes it impossible for us to think of him merely as a Teacher of Righteousness, who proposed a new love-ethic as the 'fulfilment' of the Law (Mt 5,17-20); nor merely as the end-time prophet who announced the imminent arrival of God's reign, that is, of his definitive saving intervention in human and cosmic history. For the Jesus of the gospels does not merely preach or teach, he also heals. Matthew points this out in a pair of carefully formulated parallel summaries (4,23 = 9,35) one of which he has placed immediately before the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) and the other immediately after the Miracle Cycle (a structured collection of ten miracle stories) which follows it (Mt 8-9). The summaries frame the Sermon on the Mount and the Miracle Cycle into a single unit which gives us a rounded picture (words and works) of the mission of Jesus. They tell us how 'Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the Kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity' (9,35 = 4,23). Jesus teaches, preaches, heals. He preaches (proclaims the good news of the Kingdom) in word and in deed, by teaching and by healing. He meets us endowed not only with the wisdom and the insight of the *guru*, but with the awesome and ominous power of the *shaman*.

Jesus the miracle-worker

In the scrubbed, aseptic world of the West, so thoroughly disinfected by the 'learned scoffers of religion' that it seems to have

lost all sense of the sacred, such awesome power is difficult to understand. The Jesus of western theology has become a domesticated and secularized Jesus, reduced to the measure of our own sadly impoverished religiosity. His often startling healings (Mk 7,33-36; 8,22-26) and terrifying exorcisms (Mk 1,26; 5,13; 9,26) are quickly glossed over, if they are mentioned at all. But it is difficult to see this 'civilized' Jesus in the implacable exorcist who gives battle to a demon called 'legion' (or as we in the Third World might say today, 'the United States Marines'), among the tombs that pit the desolate hillsides on the 'other side' of the lake; and who allows a large herd of pigs (private property to the bourgeois, animal life to the Hindu) to perish without a qualm. And we fail to recognize him in the outlandish healer who cures blindness by smearing diseased eyes with spittle (Mk 8,23), or heals a fever by driving out with threats the fever-demon that is troubling the patient (Lk 4,39). But the Jesus-books of the West, like the *Jesus of Nazareth* of Günther Bornkamm,⁵ or *The Founder of Christianity* of Charles Harold Dodd,⁶ continue to speak almost exclusively of the 'message' of Jesus, scarcely mentioning his miracles at all. 'The Jesus of the Word is proclaimed as significant, but the Jesus of the miracles remains an alien figure.'⁷

This is true in India too, but for a different reason: Indian readers of the gospels (Christians and others) are usually comfortable with miracles. They have grown up in a culture where the sacred and the secular live together in tolerant harmony, possibly because India has yet to pass through the fires of an Enlightenment. But if miracles are everywhere accepted as a normal part of life in India, they are not necessarily always highly valued. Miracles in India are of little religious worth. They belong to the realm of the 'sacred' not to that of the 'spiritual'. But the sacred and profane (the auspicious/inauspicious, the clean/unclean, the ordered/disordered) are both parts of the empirical world, which is ultimately to be transcended. The sacred does not belong to the world of *Brahman* (the really real), which the spiritual person attains through a liberating insight into the 'emptiness of the transitory' (*Dhammapada* vii.92). That is why miracles in India, even in popular religion, do not authenticate spiritual teaching. Only the quality of a life which by its absolute freedom from attachment and its perfect equanimity ('like a lamp standing in a windless place, unflickering', as the *Bhagavad Gita* vi.19 says), can do this, because it alone testifies to an authentic experience of enlightenment. Hindu books

about Jesus like the *Hindu view of Christ* of Swami Akhilananda,⁸ or the eight scintillating volumes of collected talks on the sayings of Jesus given by Osho Rajneesh,⁹ are even more reticent about the miracles of Jesus than the Jesus-books of the West.

The miracles of Jesus as proofs

This large indifference to the miracles of Jesus that we find in the books about him written today is, I suspect, the result of a widespread misunderstanding of their significance. We have fixed our gaze so intently on the wonder-character of these miracles that we have lost sight of their sign value. The rationalist agenda imposed on us by the Enlightenment (perhaps even earlier by scholasticism) has led to a miracle apologetic, in which the miracles of Jesus are proposed as 'proofs' of his divinity or his messiahship. But such a miracle apologetic is both anachronistic and unconvincing. Jesus did not appeal to his miracles as proofs; neither can we use them as proofs today.

The reason for this is simple. For a miracle of Jesus to function as a proof we would have to show (1) that it really happened; and (2) that what happened is inexplicable in terms of natural causes. We can do neither today. Because the gospels are not eye-witness reports but interpreted collections of community traditions written from faith to faith, it is not possible to reconstruct accurately the exact circumstances of any particular miracle they report, even though the fact that Jesus did do the kinds of things attributed to him (healings and exorcisms) is certain. And because the universe we live in is revealing itself as far too complex to be known exhaustively, it will never be possible to affirm beyond doubt that what Jesus did (should we ever get round to establishing this) was strictly miraculous. The universe today overwhelms us not only with its vastness but with its mystery. Beyond the little circle of light that our science throws on it we are aware of a huge penumbra of half glimpsed forces (which a previous age might have conceptualized as 'spirits'), whose potentialities have yet to be illuminated and understood. We are much too aware today of the paranormal (of extra-sensory perception and psychosomatic healings, of telepathy, telekinesis and altered states of consciousness, of cows responding to music and trees to angry human voices) to be able to assert with any confidence that the sudden healing of a paralytic (whether by Jesus in first-century Palestine or by Satya Sai Baba in India today,¹⁰ whether at Epidauros or at Lourdes) is

certainly a miracle in the strict sense of the word, not to be explained by natural causes alone.

It would be more useful, then, it seems to me, to give up attempts at exploring the mechanism of the miracles of Jesus (whether they were the result of natural, preternatural or supernatural causes) and enquire rather into their mystery, that is, into the significance they had for Jesus and have for us today. For the mystery remains, whatever be the mechanism for which we opt. The questions of mechanism that we ask about the miracles of Jesus today would have made little sense to him, living as he did in a world so filled with the grandeur of God that everything in it was, so to speak, miraculous. If the sun rose, it was because God made it rise (Mt 5,45); if a sparrow fell to the ground, it was because God willed it to fall (Mt 10,29); if a seed sprouted and bore fruit it was because God gave the growth (1 Cor 3,5). The question about miracles in the New Testament is never a question about whether they are or are not 'natural' (nothing there is 'natural' in the sense of proceeding from a well-ordered, autonomous nature), but a question about what kind of 'magic' (good or evil) they represent. The New Testament is concerned not about the mechanism of the miracles of Jesus but about their meaning.

The miracles of Jesus as signs

On this, New Testament teaching, while reasonably consistent, is not absolutely uniform, since it comes from traditions originating in different places and at different times. John's understanding of the miracles of Jesus, we have seen, is not quite that of the Synoptics, and the difference is suggested by differences in the terminology they use. In the Synoptics the miracles of Jesus are called *dunameis* ('mighty works') recalling the 'mighty works' wrought by Yahweh for the liberation and protection of his people at the Exodus and during their wanderings in the wilderness. The miracles of Jesus are thus experienced as expressions of God's saving power (the Kingdom) at work in Jesus. John calls the miracles of Jesus *semeia* (signs), because he sees them as visible manifestations of the new reality (elsewhere symbolized as 'light', 'life', 'glory') revealed to us in Jesus; or he calls them *erga* ('works') because they are part of his total revelatory mission. The Synoptics thus stress the saving, John the sacramental character of the miracles of Jesus.

But neither the Synoptics nor John call the miracles of Jesus *thaumasia* (amazing things), *paradoxa* (strange events), or *aretai* (wonderful deeds), terms commonly used in the Hellenistic literature of the times, all of which emphasize the wonder character of a miracle.¹¹ This is not accidental. The expression 'signs and wonders' (*semeia kai terata*) is used once in John, and the corresponding Synoptic word 'sign' (*semeion*) several times in the first three gospels with a clearly negative meaning. Jesus deplores the attitude of those who need 'signs and wonders' in order to believe (Jn 4,48). He refuses to give a 'sign' to a people he judges faithless precisely because of their demand of 'a sign from heaven' (Mt 12,38-42; 16,1-4). It is false prophets and false Christs who work 'signs and wonders' and lead many astray (Mt 24,11). Jesus gives no sign except the 'sign of Jonah', that is, the example of a prophet whose call to repentance was so self-authenticating that it led to the conversion of an unusually wicked city without any supporting prodigies (Lk 11,29-30).¹² Clearly, then, Jesus does not intend his miracles to be 'signs and wonders' or 'signs from heaven', that is, prodigies that would authenticate his mission from the outside. They are for him 'signs' (in the Johannine sense of the word), that is, events in his ministry which make visible the saving process that is going on in it, to those who have the eyes to see it. His miracles, therefore, do not compel faith but presuppose it.

Miracles of Jesus and faith

That is why the miracles of Jesus are intelligible only in a context of faith. The saying of Jesus, 'your faith has made you well', which he addresses to the woman suffering from haemorrhage (Mk 5,34) or to the blind beggar Bartimaeus (Mk 10,52); or the comment of the evangelist that Jesus could not do many mighty works in Nazareth because of the unbelief of the people (Mk 6,6), show how important faith is for a miracle to happen. But faith is needed too for a miracle to be recognized for what it is. This is brought out strikingly in the story of the healing of a dumb man (Mt 9,32-34) with which Matthew concludes his Miracle Cycle (Mt 8-9). This little story, in which the healing is described in a single rapid sentence, is not told for itself, but to provide a setting for the double chorus which it provokes. For it is this double chorus which serves as Matthew's concluding comment to his Miracle Cycle, and tells us what he understands the role of the miracles of Jesus to be. The double chorus tells us that while the crowds marvel and

say 'never was anything like this seen in Israel', the Pharisees complain, 'he casts out demons by the prince of demons' (Mt 9,33-34). The same miracle provokes opposite reactions. The admiring acclamation of the crowds is countered by the accusation of sorcery from the Pharisees. The miracles of Jesus are not proofs compelling belief. They are signs visible to those who have faith, that is, the willingness to see.

It is the absence of the faith (an obstinate refusal to see) which Jesus laments in his woes against the Galilean cities that had remained unrepentant in spite of the many 'mighty works' he had done in them (Mt 11,20-24); and it is for such faith (a willingness to see) that he pleads when he appeals to the Pharisees to believe in his 'works' (Jn 10,38), or to his disciples to believe in his oneness with the Father because of his 'works' (Jn 14,11)—the works of Jesus in John being the whole of his revelatory mission including his miracles. The worth of a miracle thus depends ultimately on the faith of the beholder.

The miracles of Jesus as signs of the Kingdom

What does faith see in a miracle? A sign of the Kingdom of God, Jesus would say. At least two of his sayings (both certainly authentic) interpret his miracles in this way. Jesus understands his healings as signs of the beginning of God's reign (Mt 11,2-6 = Lk 7,18-23); and he interprets his exorcisms as the end of Satan's rule (Mt 12,28 = Lk 11,20).

When the disciples of the Baptist come to ask him whether he is indeed the expected Messiah, Jesus replies by pointing to the healings that are taking place all around him: 'the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have the gospel preached to them' (Lk 7,22 = Mt 11,5). This looks suspiciously like a miracle apologetic—until we realize that Jesus is not just listing the cures that he has worked, but is quoting from the Hebrew Bible (Isai 35,5-6; 61,1). To establish his credentials Jesus does not point to the fact that he has worked some extraordinary healings ('wonders'), but shows that he is doing precisely those things which Isaiah had predicted would happen in 'the last days', when God would intervene decisively in history for the salvation of humankind ('signs'). Jesus therefore sees his miracles as visible expressions of God's saving power at work. They are signs that the Kingdom of God has come.

That the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk and the sick are healed are truly indications that the Kingdom has come, is because such healings are integral to God's saving action. The salvation given by God is not just salvation from sin but is a process of total healing which encompasses 'every disease and every infirmity' of our wounded cosmic and human history. The physical healings of Jesus are an indication that this vast process of healing (the Kingdom) has begun.

But such a process implies conflict. According to the apocalyptic world-view which Jesus shared with his contemporaries, sickness was not just a natural event, but the result of the activity of Satan. Satan was believed to be the 'ruler of the world' (Jn 12,31), governing it through tyrannical and impious rulers who oppressed their subjects, and through demons who caused sickness (Lk 4,39), physical disabilities like dumbness (Mt 9,32-34), mental illnesses like epilepsy (Mk 9,14-29) or schizophrenia (Mk 5,1-20), and natural catastrophes like storms (Mk 4,35-41). No salvation was possible until this vast oppressive power structure had been destroyed.¹³

Jesus believed that his exorcisms were an indication that this had happened. 'If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons,' he tells his opponents who accuse him of exorcizing through sorcery (a crime punishable by death!), 'then the Kingdom of God has come upon you' (Lk 11,20 = Mt 12,28). If demons are being expelled, this is an indication that the Kingdom of God has come, that is, that Satan's rule has ended. The exorcisms are not isolated skirmishes with demons, but the carrying out of 'mopping-up operations' following Satan's decisive defeat. It is because 'the strong man' has been bound that the 'one stronger than him' can now plunder his house (Mk 3,27).

Sayings like this, which put the miracles of Jesus into relationship with the Kingdom of God, give us a true idea of their significance. Without them the healings and exorcisms of Jesus would remain individual acts of compassion or power, which would not really amount to much. Even if we were to take literally the probably inflated reports of the Synoptics that 'large crowds' followed Jesus and were healed by him (Mk 3,7; Mt 12,15) the total number of the people healed in the few years of his ministry would not have been very many. The significance of the miracles of Jesus, then, is not to be sought in the spectacular character of the things he did (his miracles are not very different from those reported in all

religions at all times), nor in the tiny impact they made on the vast ocean of human suffering. They are significant (highly so) because they point to a radical change that has taken place. The root cause of human calamity has been destroyed. 'The ruler of the world has been cast out' (Jn 12,31). Satan's rule has ended, and the reign of God has begun.

Because the reign of God is both a gift and a task, implying a dialectic of proclamation and response, of freedom and grace expressed by Ignatius of Loyola in his dictum that we must pray as if everything depended only on God, but work as if everything depended on ourselves alone, the miracles of Jesus as signs of the Kingdom are also invitations to engage in work for the healing transformation that they signify. Gerd Theissen in his remarkable work on the *Miracle stories of the early Christian tradition* has pointed out how closely the transmission of the miracles by the early Christian community was linked to their social praxis.

The important point is that the primitive Christian communities did not meet such fears [fears of unemployment resulting from physical disability] merely with miracle-stories, but saw to it that no sick person need to go hungry because of lack of work; the important point is that they looked after the sick . . . The healings must be seen against the background of the community which recounted them, as collective symbolic actions by which distress was remedied and in which the members found the strength to combat it in their ordinary lives by actions which were not merely 'symbolic'.¹⁴

Does not this remain the abiding significance of the miracles of Jesus, even at a time when the apocalyptic world view has given place to a scientific one?

NOTES

¹ The expression alludes to Kysar, R.: *John, the maverick gospel* (Atlanta, 1976), where the distinctiveness of John is well presented.

² The seven miracles narrated in the gospel are the changing of water into wine (2,1-11); the healing of a royal official's son (4,46-54); the healing of a paralytic (5,1-9); the feeding of five thousand people with five loaves (6,1-14); Jesus walking on the waters of the lake of Gennaseret (6,16-21); the healing of a man born blind (9,1-12); and the raising of Lazarus from the dead (11,1-44).

³ Kee, H. C.: *Miracle in the early Christian world* (New Haven, 1983), p 321.

⁴ Jeremias, J.: *New Testament theology*, volume one (London, 1971), p 91.

⁵ Bornkamm, G.: *Jesus of Nazareth* (London, 1960).

⁶ Dodd, C. H.: *The Founder of Christianity* (London, 1971).

⁷ Betz, O.: *What do we know about Jesus?* (London, 1968), p 59.

⁸ Akhilananda, Swami: *Hindu view of Christ* (New York, 1919).

⁹ Rajneesh, Bhagwan Sree: *The mustard seed, volumes I-II* (Pune, 1975); *Come follow me, volumes I-IV* (Pune, 1976-77); and *I say unto you, volumes I-II* (Pune, 1980). The first is on the Gospel of Thomas, the others on the canonical gospels. In all we hear the voice of Rajneesh rather than that of Jesus. But the talks are always lively, often brilliant and sometimes offering stunningly original insights into the significance of Jesus.

¹⁰ See Murphet, H.: *Sai Baba: man of miracles* (Madras, 1972) for a reasonably critical believer's account of the miracles of the most renowned wonder worker in India today.

¹¹ Note that *thaumasia* is used of the miracles of Jesus once in the New Testament in Mt 21,5; and *paradoxa* also once in Lk 5,26. The 'wonderful deeds' (*aretai*) mentioned in 1 Pet 2,9 and nowhere else does not refer to the miracles of Jesus.

¹² Only Matthew (12,40) refers the sign of Jonah to the resurrection of Jesus after three days in the tomb, a typical piece of early Christian midrash.

¹³ See Soares-Prabhu, G.: 'The miracles: subversion of a power structure?', in Kappen, S. (ed): *Jesus today* (Madras, 1985), pp 21-29.

¹⁴ Theissen, G.: *Miracle stories of the early Christian tradition* (Edinburgh, 1983), p 251.