

WHY THE NEED FOR SIGNS AND WONDERS?

By ANGELA TILBY

'God's revelation is always recognizable to man. Only he should know how to read that book, that word.'—Fr Jozo Zovko, former parish priest of St James, Medjugorje, Yugoslavia.

SIGNS AND WONDERS have always been a vigorous element in the faith of large numbers of Christian people. Yet they are also phenomena which give many unease. It is feared that they make the Church vulnerable to two damaging charges: superstition, and manipulating the faith of the naive and simple.

In this last new decade before the year 2000 the Christian world is full of signs and counter-signs. We wonder whether the earth is growing too burdened to sustain us. We are anxious about the future of the human race. It is not the first time in history that Christians have had these worries, but in our age there are more solid reasons for our fears than the approach of the millennium. Our fears concern the end of the world. They are the stuff of apocalyptic. This is why in this article I want to consider how we might interpret the signs and wonders associated with the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which have a marked apocalyptic flavour.

What do these mean and how are they to be understood? Is the liberal wing of the Church right to pour scorn on them? Are those who take them seriously right to interpret them literally?

I find myself asking these questions because I happen to have met a number of Marian visionaries in the course of my work as a documentary film-maker for BBC television. Five of them were the now famous teenage seers from Medjugorje in Yugoslavia. Three were Irish children: two little boys, the sons of farmers, and a little girl from a housing estate near Londonderry. One was a member of a Roman Catholic secular institute in Northern Japan, a crippled woman from a Buddhist background.

Apparitions of Mary are not new, of course, but there do seem to have been an awful lot of them in the last hundred years. In Ireland and Africa, in Spain and Portugal, in the Middle East and

in Asia, and in various parts of Eastern Europe there are signs, portents and miracles. Statues that move and weep tears and blood. Lights in the sky and movements of the sun. Unearthly illuminations of the Blessed Sacrament. Healings. And children and women who experience religious ecstasy, with accompanying visions and supernatural messages.

Taken at face value these messages are rather horrifying. Typically they consist of denunciations of the evils of the present time. The world is gripped in a conflict between God and personified evil. Powerful nations are condemned, particularly those of the eastern bloc, though the Medjugorje apparitions were just as scathing about the materialism of western countries. The messages also contain warnings to the Church about the dangers of false doctrine and compromised practices.

There are often sombre descriptions of the 'chastisements' which God is storing up to send on the world. God is the heavenly judge whose wrath can only be appeased by the blood of the crucified. Hell and Satan are very near and the only escape is by conversion. Traditional practices of prayer and penance are recommended including frequent confession and attendance at Mass, praying the rosary and fasting.

The faithful are to pray not only for the forgiveness of their own sins, but to help avert the catastrophes that are coming on the world. A series of messages from Japan contains an appeal for 'victim-souls' who will voluntarily share the sufferings of Christ, quenching the anger of God the Father.

As an Anglican I find myself faintly baffled by all this. The Anglican view of Mary is one of cautious high regard. Her *Magnificat* is the emotional centre of that calm blend of the monastic offices of Vespers and Compline, Evensong. There is a tendency to see our Lady as a type of free and willing obedience and contemplative wisdom. In the Anglican imagination she is a primary symbol of feminine wisdom and goodness.

In contrast popular Catholicism portrays Mary as a powerful figure before God, the 'woman clothed with the sun'. The differences are not only doctrinal, they are emotional and even tribal. In the theology that goes with her cult she is a prophetic and apocalyptic figure. This is an extension of her role as *theotokos*, Mother of God. As the one who brings God to birth in time she is bound up with the issue of our salvation. She, like John the Baptist, stands on the threshold of the new age.

So it is possible to see her activity in the Catholic imagination as a sign of God's presence and power, which is always approaching us, and looking for our response. She is the one who embodies the universal and evangelical theme: 'The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe in the gospel' (Mark 1,15).

I believe that the signs and wonders associated with Mary remind us of certain aspects of the character of God which we are inclined to forget or rationalize away. (The ever-vital and disruptive evangelical tradition carries these elements in other branches of the Christian Church.) They also draw our attention to the legitimate needs and longings of the 'little ones', the outsiders, who have no power or prestige in the Church, although they cling to its teachings in faith and hope.

At the same time I believe that modern signs and wonders associated with Mary need to be appreciated from a place of understanding. They are not to become an excuse for credulity or for an experiment in Christian fundamentalism. Signs and wonders are what they always have been, unexpected gifts which unfold the reality of salvation to those who have lost their sense of worth. This is well expressed in the Alternative Service Book's collect for the third Sunday after Epiphany:

Almighty God, whose Son revealed in signs and miracles the wonder of your saving love: renew your people with your heavenly grace, and in all our weakness sustain us by your mighty power . . .

Such miracles are not usually directed at those who know they are saved. Nor are they necessarily for those with an innocent history. The Croatian Catholics of Medjugorje have a decidedly shady past. Many who receive apparitions are looking for the restoration of nationalist hopes and dreams, much as Simeon in St Luke's Gospel who 'looked for the consolation of Israel' (Luke 2,25). The Blessed Virgin comes as the Queen of heaven with a message of wrathful warning against the nations and of hope to those whose history is full of the guilt and shame of suffering, whether deserved or undeserved.

I see the phenomenon of Marian apparitions in much the same way as I see the book of Revelation. The Apocalypse of John is a highly disturbing text. Many would see it as sub-Christian in its gloating ferocity and triumphalism. It is a book full of secrets and

disclosures: plagues, woes, beasts and endless speculations, cosmic, futuristic and numerological. Yet it ends the bible with the luminous imagery of God's triumph over evil, the descent of the Holy City, and the Church's age-long cry for the return of the Lord, *Maranatha*, Come, Lord Jesus.

Without the ferocity would there be the passion? In apocalyptic, as in the writings of the Old Testament prophets, the two seem to go together.

I am coming to think that such images and expressions of passion are necessary. Not only because we who come on the whole from the rich and educated world would be poorer without them, but because the poor and the persecuted need them to survive. The expression of the wrath of God, the judgement against the persecutors, the scathing analysis of the weaknesses of the contemporary Church, the description of the woes that will fall on the world before the final redemption are psychologically necessary for that survival, and do not contradict or undermine the possibility of the generous forgiveness of enemies. In fact they make it possible because they provide a focus and a drain for the human guilt and rage which accompanies shameful experience.

Apocalyptic literature and visionary experience are, above all, about the restoration of respect to those who have lost it through the accidents of nature and history. This is why it is offensive to those of us who have not been so traumatized. We simply do not like to think that human nature can be so awful and experience so black and guilt-laden as to require such ferocious salvation from such a terrifying God.

We should not however dismiss the apocalyptic strand as a form of pious compensation without reminding ourselves that some of the most formative parts of the bible are concerned with God's terrible interventions in favour of the lost and the disreputable. Also that these interventions have wide effects in determining not only the fate of nations, but the direction of the whole global human enterprise.

Signs and wonders and the character of God

The God of the Exodus from Egypt is a God of signs and wonders who manifests himself to a slave race under oppression. He is also something of a heavenly thug, who specializes in terror by blood and bugs. Even Pharaoh's court magicians recognize in the plagues that fall on Egypt that 'this is the finger of God'

(Exodus 8,19). Yahweh-of-hosts is not a kind God, not a rational or luminous God, but a partisan God who prefers outsiders to insiders, a God of storm, cloud and darkness.

The primitive character of God is not the whole biblical picture of course. But it is part of it. The biblical God is not a Greek God: lucid, impersonal, subject to necessity, remote. He is a God of miracle before he is a God of providence, a God of salvation before he is a God of creation.

In the Old Testament there is often a sense that God is at odds with the world, with its nature and its history and its wicked ways. A God at odds with the world is a hidden God, a God who needs signs to hint at his presence, who is not directly manifested. We cannot guess at the final purposes of God. He is not subject to necessity as the Greek gods are. There is no built-in mystical direction to nature or history which is pre-set to unfold. History is in some sense genuinely open, which is why the bible places such a frightening emphasis on the importance of human choice and the inevitability of divine judgement.

Apocalyptic literature emphasizes these themes. It is possible to be horribly wrong about God, to make an ultimate mistake. The doctrine of hell, as it begins to emerge in apocalyptic literature, may terrify us and distort our mental picture of God, but it is also the ultimate assurance of human freedom. What and how we choose really matters. If God were only rational our future would be determined. There would be no choice, no drama, no cross, no resurrection.

Signs and wonders and 'the outsiders'

So we have a problem. Liberal theology always wants to have the last word, and insists that God is rational. But the biblical experience of God is also that of an interventionist miracle worker, on the side of those who struggle with and even against the facts of creation and history. This is profoundly uncomfortable for many of us and raises a horrendous agenda of philosophical and pastoral questions.

Curiously I suspect that the problems arise in an acute form for those of us who are rich in reason and its fruits. We do not experience ourselves as outsiders. We do not suffer in a direct and personal way the arbitrary and harsh aspects of the physical world in the form of handicap, accident or bereavement. Nor do we

experience the political dispossession and loss of cultural identity that many suffer all over the world.

It is hard for those of us who have done reasonably well from creation and history to approach the possibility of suffering with any other emotion than fear. It is also hard for us to imagine any way of coping with natural and social evils other than by the cure or removal of their causes. Everything in the scientific and political tradition of the West teaches us to seek the causes of human pain and then to act to remove them.

But cure and removal of pain is what *insiders* do. They are options open to those who have power and knowledge. Liberation theology borrows from Marx's critique of advanced capitalism, but it is in itself part of the wisdom of the West. No one has access to it without knowing someone who has been educated in the rationalist traditions of western universities. Its ultimate strategy is to extend power to the powerless, to turn the outsiders into insiders. But it can do nothing to deal with those who remain or become powerless *after* liberation, or with the abuses of power by those who have it legitimately in the eyes of the Church and the world.

The largest group of 'outsiders' in the Catholic Church are women. Their only role in the confessional, in the pew and at the sanctuary, is to be receptive to the grace and wisdom that ordained men bestow upon them. This is endlessly humiliating. It provokes constant shame and guilt, which is so unbearable that it is rarely felt or acknowledged. All, except men, are children in the Church, perpetual 'little-ones'. It is not surprising that apparitions of our Lady happen to women and pre-adolescents. They are the ones whose entire existence is bounded by shame. In a more favoured climate some will believe that perpetual humiliation is the Christian woman's destiny and glory. Others will become feminists. But where obedience is the only option a change of the direction of obedience can open transforming possibilities. To be the recipient of an apparition is to find a new loyalty, to discover that in spite of women's low estate before ordained men it *need not always be so*. Mary appears to women as the angel appeared to her, with the unexpected greeting of grace.

It is significant that apparitions happen to women, but it is also significant to look at the history of the communities in which they occur. Spectacular signs do not happen to those who are naturally at home with God, or to those who understand God's politics, but to those who are outside. As Jesus points out there were many sick

widows in Israel but Elijah was sent only to the widow of Zarephath. There were many lepers in Israel but Elisha cured only Naaman the Syrian.

So it is not surprising that signs and wonders happen in those communities with a past of guilt or suffering that the world and the Church find disreputable. The apparitions of Mary affirm the openness of history to God's judgement and grace, the availability of God to the powerless and disenfranchised and God's refusal to give up on those whom the world and the Church find contemptible. They are signs, above all, of the anarchic and primitive aspects of God's character, and they save us from the idolatry of determinism.

A cautious interpretation

Though I believe apparitions are a valid revelation of the character of God it is important that the details of the messages should be treated cautiously. Mary is *theotokos*, the one who gives God birth in time. Nevertheless she is a creature, and her message is creaturely. She is not to be worshipped. (Nor is the 'angel' who delivers the final message of the book of Revelation [Revelation 19,9-10].)

How then, do we interpret our Lady's messages? By the same criteria as we would any other apocalyptic utterance. We must see them as arising from and directed at the communities which express them. Here, once again the book of Revelation can help. Revelation is the harrowing testimony of a bitterly persecuted Church. It is emotionally honest in its rage and desperation for God's intervention: 'How long, O Lord, how long?' is the cry of the persecuted. Yet the bizarre apocalyptic warnings are not to be interpreted literally. The secrets of God's future are not known; they can only be indicated by symbolic times and seasons.

In the same way the chronology and universality of Mary's warnings are not to be interpreted literally. No apocalyptic vision ever comes to pass in all its bizarre detail. The secret giving of times and signs expresses the reality of God's involvement and the urgency of God's call in *this* particular twisted strand of human history.

We should understand the scriptures enough to know that the mysteries of God's open future can only be described in symbolic speech. The signs do not signify an outcome, but a presence and a purpose.

We should also recognize that the fierceness of the language of judgement and chastisement may not arise only from the sins of the unbelieving world but from the repressed shame of the community from which the visions spring.

In recent messages in Japan our Lady made a plea for 'victim-souls' to share Christ's sufferings. In 1945 the largest Catholic community in the Orient was almost wiped out by the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. This tragedy was deeply shameful in a Japanese context. It ended the war in favour of the Western allies. The emperor broadcast surrender to his people warning them that they were going to have to 'bear the unbearable'. Those who found they had most to bear were the surviving bomb victims. Even today sufferers from Nagasaki and Hiroshima are treated as social lepers. The only theology which made any sense of that appalling experience was a theology of sacrifice. The Nagasaki Christians believed that they were 'chosen' to suffer for the sins of the whole nation.

We may dislike all this and disapprove of the theology which goes with it. But it is a real existential theology, drawn from the abyss of an experience we do not have. The plea for 'victim-souls' may be a way of honouring and giving respect to those who have already paid that price, or who pay it now in their own bodies, and who must choose to endure what they have to endure or become hopelessly embittered.

Repressed guilt may also play a part in the form and content of apparitions and messages. This became clear to me in Medjugorje when I discovered the horrifying nature of the war crimes committed by the Croatian Catholics against their Serbian neighbours. The weeping Madonna appeared calling for repentance a few miles from the site of a massacre which had occurred forty years before. Nobody told me this and few would acknowledge it. But it was in the history books. My guess is that this war-time experience gave shape to this series of apparitions and continues, at an unacknowledged level, to inform it. And it will continue to do so unless the meaning of the apparitions for the community which had them is actually realized and absorbed.

The bible witnesses to the constant struggle human beings have to reconcile the God who is known through reason and accessible in history and the natural world, and the God who is unknown and absent apart from revelation. The sophisticated priestly theology of

the book of Genesis makes God the creator of the heavens and earth, the universal law-giver and Lord of the past and future.

But the book of Job takes on the claims of Genesis and sets them against the facts of human suffering. In Job, the dark and primitive origins of God's character are not forgotten. At the climax of the book God appears as alarmingly as ever 'out of the whirlwind', and his message is not immediately consoling: 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?'

The implication seems to be that God is in some sense still struggling with the creation. There are tragic necessities within the nature and history of the world which we experience, but do not understand. These necessities involve us in choices that are extremely costly, the implications of which are often beyond us. Shame and guilt are the inescapable price of our freedom to be God's creatures. Shame and guilt will accompany us as we set about coming to terms with our ecological crisis and with the political tensions of the new world that is emerging. But more important than shame and guilt is *hope* and the consolation of God's presence as our companion. God chooses us before we choose God.

In the apparitions of Mary, God gives guilty and shamed people the assurance of his choosing and the chance to choose *again* to collaborate with his purposes.

Prayer and penance are mechanisms by which our false wholeness and perfectionism are dismantled and we become capable of bearing the Word of God to life from the depths of our innermost being. Mary the Mother of God is not only the prophet of this possibility, but the example of how it occurs, and might again, in us. I return to my Anglican roots in seeing her as the one who proclaims that 'He hath put down the mighty from their seat and exalted the humble and meek'. If each one of us who is an 'I' can incorporate that cry of wonder in the circumstances of each political and ecological existence then the messages of the apparitions will be shown to be genuinely universal and evangelical.