

## The Gospel in the Miracles.

MANY of us have been disquieted by the scant respect often accorded to-day to the miracles of Jesus. The modern mind, proud of its mighty works, tends to set its own achievement as the limit of possibility for the ages that are past, and accordingly finds no place for the miraculous even in the Gospel. We resent this verdict the more because the question is rarely treated primarily as a question of evidence. For the most part, the evidence is not really considered. The miraculous is first rejected, and then reasons are sought to justify its rejection. It is the scepticism that creates the reasons, not the reasons that create the scepticism. This method frequently treats the Gospel records with the utmost contempt. A personal bias against miracles is made the measure of their reliability. That events are recorded in them receives little or no consideration. It is enough that miracles are outside modern experience; that the spirit of the age finds no place for them; that they are found by some Christians to be embarrassing in their approach to the world: on such flimsy grounds the reliability of the New Testament writers is easily set aside.

There are many, of course, who, while rejecting the miracles, earnestly desire to retain the spiritual teaching of Jesus, and whole-heartedly acknowledge its authority. But it rarely appears to occur to them how seriously they have impaired the trustworthiness even of that teaching. For the same Gospels, whose reliability they so easily surrender in the matter of miracles, constitute the sole authority for the teaching of Jesus; and, indeed, the evidence for what the critics would keep is no stronger than for what they reject.

Underlying this attitude to the miracles there is the assumption that miracles in no way form a vital part of Jesus' work, that they can be dispensed with and set aside without any impoverishing of the spiritual content of His message. It is that assumption I desire to challenge by emphasising the gospel in the miracles.

In the first place, we have still to insist that the Gospels are not built up of two well defined and clearly limited strata, miracles and doctrine, the one super-imposed upon the other, and either capable of being removed without loss or hurt to the other. Rather are the Gospels like a fabric, in which miracles and doctrine are the warp and woof, combining to

make not only the fabric itself, but the pattern that runs all through it. Take away either warp or woof, and you destroy both fabric and pattern. You cannot take the miracles out of the Gospel story without at the same time taking a great deal more than the miracles. Much of Jesus' teaching about faith stands in closest connection with accounts of miracles. Almost all His teaching concerning the Sabbath is inseparably bound up with cases of healing on the sabbath day. His rebuke of Pharisaism is largely linked with accounts of wonders He worked; one of the sternest passages directed against them arose out of the charge that He healed with the help of the devil. All this goes if we take out the miracles. The long discourse about the Bread of Life goes; for it arose immediately out of the feeding of the five thousand. We lose such words of Jesus as "I am the Bread of Life. He that cometh to Me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst. Labour not for the meat that perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life which the Son of Man shall give unto you. He that believeth on Me hath everlasting life." The great word goes too—"I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth on Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live, and whosoever liveth and believeth on Me shall never die." For that word is firmly embedded in the story of the raising of Lazarus.

And with the removal of miracles, we lose not only precious doctrine. I doubt whether we should be able to keep the temptation in the wilderness, unless we can believe that Jesus possessed miraculous powers. We lose the answer of Jesus to the enquiry of John the Baptist—"Go and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and to the poor the gospel is preached." We lose the explanation of the popular enthusiasm for Jesus, of the desire to make Him a king, of the alarm of the rulers, of the desire of Herod to see Him; all so easily understood in the light of miracles, but very difficult apart from them. We lose too, much of our thought of Jesus. We have learned of the quality and the breadth of His compassion, of His tenderness, largely from the deeds of which some would deprive us. It was from His ministry to the sick that the Church took example, when it amazed the pagan world by its care for the diseased and the stricken. Men cannot reject the miracles without rejecting a great deal more. Take away the woof of miracles, and the whole fabric and pattern of the Gospel story is shockingly mutilated.

Then in the second place, the miracles may be said to be a vital part of the Gospel in that they are essential to the spiritual

glory of Jesus. When a man of great mind appears in the world, we are confident that he will so master the laws which express the Divine method in governing the material order, as to make that order his servant in a special degree. Such a man will find for himself ministries and helps of which other men will be ignorant. Is there no peculiar power that we may look for in the man who keeps in perfect communion with the Spirit that underlies and sustains the physical universe? Can we conceive a unique relationship to God that does not carry with it a unique power over God's world? Can we conceive a spiritual lordship that is only a lordship of the spiritual, and that has no manifestation in the material order? The miracles of Jesus are surely demanded by His spiritual pre-eminence. It is because He was immeasurably different from others, and different precisely where difference counts most, in the realm of the spirit that is the spirit of creation; it is because of that difference that we expect to find in Him such deeds as never man did.

He walked among eternal things with sure step, and was the one man earth has known who was more at home with the spiritual than with the material—passing strange will it be if such a man performed no wondrous works! Yet the rejection of the miracles leaves Jesus with less direct power over the material than an ordinary successful man of the world; and not only insulates the physical world from the influence of the spiritual, but leaves the glory of Jesus lacking the confirmation of such works as we feel we have reason to expect. I think it was Hudson Taylor who said "If Christ be not Lord of all, He is not Lord at all." Surely we may say that in this connection. We hail Jesus as Lord of Heaven, and because of that, not Lord of Heaven alone, but Lord of Heaven and earth and sea.

Then I would suggest that the miracles are of the essence of the Gospel in that they confirm, and in a measure fulfil, the longing of the human heart for what the Bible calls a new earth. We all have felt that pain and disease and death, and Nature's age-long and relentless affliction of man, do not represent God's final purpose for this world, but are only a stage in the development of a diviner order. Looking back over the dim past, we have a sense of how in those far-off days that are almost beyond recall, Nature presented to man an even fiercer aspect than she does to-day. In a measure her fierceness has been tamed, and to-day we are less at her mercy than was primitive man. It is not only that man has developed; but with the development of man there has taken place a kind of redemption of nature. May we not look for a day when that

redemption of nature shall be complete, and man shall no longer have anything to fear in all her ways? We admit the educative value of pain and death and uncertainty. But is it God's will that man should for ever be a pupil in this stern school? Is man never to master its lessons, and to graduate into a higher course? And if, and when, man graduates, will the old discipline be continued? If the spirit of man through ages of discipline comes to walk with God, will not the course of training be adapted to his new standing, and nature be changed so that man shall be freed from the pains and fears that helped to redeem him? Such a hope appears in the first chapter of Genesis, when God makes man to have dominion over all things. It was such a hope of the redemption of nature that Paul outlined in his words: "Even the creation waits with eager longing for the sons of God to be revealed. For creation was not rendered futile by its own choice, but by the will of Him who thus made it subject, the hope being that creation as well as man would one day be freed from its thralldom to decay and gain the glorious freedom of God. To this day, we know, the entire creation sighs and throbs with pain." Clearly Paul looked for a redemption of nature; not merely a redemption of man that should lift him above the menace of nature, but a redemption of nature itself that should remove the menace. Of that hope, the miracles of Jesus are a confirmation, showing as they do, that when the perfect man of God walked the earth, nature turned upon Him a kinder face, and brought to Him amazing ministries; so that where Jesus came, death and the curse were in a measure known no more. To such a day we may turn our hearts. As the writer of Hebrews says, we see it not yet; "Now we see not yet all things put under man; but we see Jesus." In Christ, we may dream of the day when the last fierceness of nature towards man shall be tamed; when with the final redemption of man, nature itself shall be redeemed; "when the lion will lie down with the calf, and the wolf with the lamb, and the leopard with the kid, and they shall not hurt nor destroy in all the holy mountain." The miracles of Jesus are a confirming of that hope, a foreshadowing of that day.

There is even more to be said. The miracles are such a vital part of the Gospel that apart from them the glory of the cross of Jesus is dimmed. The glory of the cross is not only that Jesus died there but that He died there a willing sacrifice, that He deliberately chose to die in that way. He was no helpless victim unable to break from the hold of His enemies and from the strength of the nails. At any moment He could have broken from every hold upon Him. He did not submit to the cross merely by entering Jerusalem. In one sense that

entry did make the cross inevitable. But really the cross was never inevitable save by reason of Jesus' preparedness to endure it. He submitted to the cross every moment He hung upon it, submitted to it in the sense that even then He might have saved Himself from it. The taunt of the Jews: "Save Thyself; if Thou be the Son of God come down from the cross. He saved others, Himself He cannot save," means so much to us because of our conviction that all they asked Jesus to do was possible to Him; He could have saved Himself. But if Jesus' miracles are rejected; if we are left with a Jesus who had no power over the material such as the miracles manifested, then the cross takes a new and a lesser significance. In that case Jesus would hang there a helpless victim; as helpless over His cross as either of the thieves was over his. It is no longer the Son of God laying down His life of Himself, with power to lay it down and to take it again, who hangs there; the Son of God going forth to war, never so surely fighting for the soul of man as there, never more surely choosing His way, never more free; it is not that Christ, but one who has no alternative but to hang there, and no power to save Himself. Not but that such a Jesus would have His glory; but it would not be the glory of the Jesus who hung there when at any moment He could have come down from the cross. The miracles are vital to the glory of His cross.

Of the resurrection I will only say with Paul: "If Christ be not risen, then is your faith vain," and point out that in the early days this miracle was the Gospel with which the Apostles evangelised the world. It was the Gospel of the resurrection that they preached, the Gospel of a miracle.

But we need to be reminded that when confronted with the facts of disease and calamity and death, there have been an innumerable company who have found a Gospel for their need in the miracles that show Jesus as having power to heal, able to impose His will upon wind and wave, and to command even death. They have not asked for miracles to be worked again; but that Jesus worked them once has been, and is, to them a Gospel of God. The miracles assure them that His hand controls whatever they fear, and that if God does not to-day work for faith as He worked of old, it is only because He has some better thing for them.

So I plead for a recognition of the Gospel in the miracles. We have more reason for a bias in favour of miracle than for a bias against it. It is not for us to define the nature of miracle or the process of miracle. It is enough that we know what we mean when we speak of the miracles of Jesus. We have seen what mighty changes have been worked in the world by

the discovery of electricity; yet no one can tell us what electricity is. So we believe yet mightier changes can be worked by that discovery which is union with God; and we have a glimpse of those changes in the wonders of Jesus. We believe that a knowledge of the totality of things will show His miracles to have been natural happenings. That science with only a partial knowledge even of the material universe should reject them, need not trouble us; for science is admittedly most ignorant in respect of those very factors that are creative of miracle, the factors which are spiritual. It is no more than if a scientist of past ages should have mocked at the possibility of men speaking to each other across the world, when he was ignorant of the forces that made wireless possible. It is not for Christians to accept the verdict of science upon the issue of miracles. It is for us to look for the day when an enlargement of its knowledge will set science recognising the possibility of works that to-day lie outside its ken. In part, this has already come about. For not so long ago, science rejected all the miracles of Jesus. To-day the growth of mental medicine has led those who rejected all to grant that the healings of Jesus are authentic, and this in spite of the fact that no modern medicine can produce cases at all comparable with the miracles of Jesus.

So we may look to the day when a larger and a truer science shall establish all those miracles. Till then, we may possess our souls in quiet confidence, accepting the miracles of Jesus as a vital part of His Gospel of God; not, as Dr. Cairns has suggested, "seals attached to the document of salvation, but integral parts of the document itself."

H. H. SUTTON.