

Why Did Jesus Call Miracles Signs?

Interviewing John About Jesus.

In 1989, Lyn and I and our three kids were in London on a Sunday morning, trying to find St Paul's Anglican Church in South Harrow. We knew the church service started at 11 o'clock, but we didn't know where the church was. All we knew was that the church was somewhere in South Harrow. Our sole navigation tool was a London Bus routes map, which was pretty useless, because it didn't have any of the minor roads marked on it. We had managed to find our way to South Harrow, but South Harrow is a big area. It was five minutes to 11, and we had no idea where the church was. So I said to the kids as I was driving "We need to ask the Lord for a sign". So as we drove, we prayed and asked the Lord to show us where the church was. When I said "ask the Lord for a sign" I wasn't thinking of a literal sign. I was expecting the Lord would prompt me to turn left or right, or that we might spot the church from the road we were driving on. Suddenly our 13 year old in the back seat said "There's a sign!" Sure enough, high up on a telephone pole, almost out of sight, was a tiny sign that said "St Paul's Church, South Harrow" with an arrow pointing to a side street. We turned right, then left, down a small lane, straight into the only remaining car park, and walked into the church service right on the dot of 11 o'clock. In our family, when we talk about asking the Lord for a sign, that story invariably comes up. For us, that sign was a miracle.

Desperately Needing Signs

Now here's a curious thing about signs. We don't notice them until we need one. They are just part of the wallpaper of our day, until we need them to show us the way. Then they become very important. Most of us have had the experience of being in a public place, desperately needing to find a toilet, and looking around for that magical sign that says WC. Or we are on a motorway in unfamiliar territory looking for a particular off ramp, then those signs become of supreme importance.

In the gospel of John, Jesus describes some of the things he did as "signs". Here is one of them.

"After the two days he left for Galilee. (Now Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honour in his own country.) When he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him. They had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, for they also had been there. Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death. "Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe." The royal official said, "Sir, come down before my child dies." Jesus replied, "You may go. Your son will live." The man took Jesus at his word and departed. While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living. When he inquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, "The fever left him yesterday at the seventh hour." Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." So he and all his household believed. This was the second miraculous sign that Jesus performed, having come from Judea to Galilee". (John 4:43 - 54)

The Second Miracle At Cana.

The first miracle that Jesus called a sign took place in this same town. Jesus had been attending a wedding at Cana, when the host ran out of wine. Seeing the need, Jesus turned about 600 litres of water into first class wine. So we might guess that when Jesus turned up for the second time at Cana, there would have been a lot of people following him around with big jars of water, hoping for so free wine. But this time the miracle is different. This time it's a top official from the court of King Herod who is desperate for some help. He has come from Capernaum, a little further around the lake. He has a little boy who is dying and he desperately needs Jesus. This father is a big shot in the court of King Herod who is used to giving orders. He's used to telling people what to do. But now he's an emotional mess. His approach to Jesus is a combination of begging Jesus to

come, and ordering Jesus to come. He sees Jesus as a miracle worker who can be commanded to do whatever the royal official wants. "Look. My son is dying. I'm telling you come. I'm begging you. Come". He's desperate. He wants Jesus, and he wants him now.

The interesting thing is that Jesus doesn't go with him. He just gives an order of his own, and tells the man to go home. Amazingly, the man goes home to find that his dying son got better at the very moment that Jesus said he would live. It's a miracle. The result of that miracle is that not only did the man believe in Jesus, but all of his household. So his family, their servants, friends and relatives were all drawn to faith in Christ because of this miracle.

The Miracle In Jerusalem

Another miracle healing is found in Chapter 5. Here it is.

"Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me." Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat." But he replied, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.' "So they asked him, "Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?" The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there. Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. (John 5:1-15)

With the first healing story I read, no one in Cana knew that a healing had taken place. It was a miracle done at a distance. It wasn't until the official got home that he found his son alive and well. But this healing in Jerusalem was a very public event. Who is going to miss the significance of a man who has been a paraplegic for 38 years, getting up and walking home with his mat under his arm? What made it even more the talk of the town was that Jesus did this on the Sabbath.

Both of these stories contain important teaching for us about the power of Jesus to heal. They contain important teaching about the need for faith on the part of the person asking Christ for help. Don't you find it incredible that Jesus asks a person who has been a paraplegic for 38 years if he wants to get well? Is that a dumb question or what? Of course he would want to be well. Who wouldn't? Actually it's not such a dumb question, because there are a few people who have been sick for most of their lives who actually don't want to be well. They have become so used to people caring for them, and fussing over them, they have begun to like it. When you are well, you have to take responsibility for yourself. Over the years I've come across people who don't want to take responsibility for the way they are. They just want to blame everyone else, and moan and groan about their condition. It's a good question Jesus asked. "Do you want to get well?"

Understanding Miracles.

It's possible to understand these stories at different levels. If you look at them as straight miracle stories, we see the power of Jesus at work. He has the power to turn water into wine. With a spoken word he has the power to be able to raise a dying boy from his sickbed. With a single command, he had the power to put a paraplegic back on his feet, restoring wasted muscles in an instant. Or we can see the dimension of faith in miracles of healing. The faith of a father to believe Jesus and go home to find his son

alive. The faith of a paraplegic to stand up, pick up his mat and walk. But Jesus doesn't see these miracles as ends in themselves. He says they are signs. He says these miraculous works are actually pointing to another reality.

Now before we go into what Jesus meant by these miracles being signs, just think about why we need signs and how we use them in everyday life.

1. I Need A Sign When I'm On Unfamiliar Territory.

When I drive from Nyon to Geneva now, I know the way because I've driven the route many times. But it wasn't like that on day one. When I first started driving in Switzerland, I was looking carefully for signs. I was surrounded by signs. Some of them were advertising signs. Some of them were direction signs. Some of them were speed restriction signs. Some of them were important, and some of them I ignored. The signs I needed at that time were the direction signs and the speed restriction signs. I couldn't care less about reading advertising signs on shop fronts and vehicles at that time. The most valuable signs to me were the direction signs. Until I became familiar with the route, I needed those signs.

2. I Need A Sign To Help Me Understand What Is Going On.

Signs help us make sense of what we are looking at. In 2005 Lyn and I drove down a disused runway of an American airbase on the Island of Tinian, in the Northern Marianas group of islands. At the end of that runway, half overgrown by jungle, was a concrete pit, with a sign. When I read the sign, I realised the full significance of the place where we were standing. That pit had contained the first atomic bomb dropped on Japan. The sign told me that I was standing at the place where the bomber Enola Gay had been loaded before taking off to bomb Hiroshima. Signs help us make sense of a bigger reality.

What The Signs Point To.

When the royal official came to Jesus asking him to heal his son, Jesus said this; ***"Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, you will never believe."*** That's the key to understanding what Jesus was doing with these miracles. The miracles themselves are not the important thing. They are signposts pointing to something else. They are indicators to the reality of life in the Kingdom of God. They are ways that Jesus is revealing himself as the God of all power. Turning water into wine wasn't about making a whole lot of wedding guests happy. It was Jesus revealing himself as the Lord of the whole natural world. Healing a little boy at a distance with a spoken word was Jesus disclosing himself as the one who has authority over sickness and death. Commanding a paraplegic to get up and walk and then telling him not to sin is more than just putting on a show for interested people. It was a demonstration that God himself was among them.

The Signs Around Us.

All around us are signs of the power of God. Sometimes it's a prayer we have prayed that has been answered. Sometimes it's a prayer others have prayed for us. There are signs of the activity of God in the events and circumstances of your life. There are ways God has been revealing himself to you. There are things God is doing to get your attention. All around your life, God is putting signs to show you he is real. He's trying to get your attention. He's trying to point you to the reality of life with Christ. He's putting up signs to help you understand where you are in life and what you are looking at.

But are you seeing the signs? Do you understand what you are seeing? Are you following the signs to their destination. Earlier on I said that we are not even conscious of the signs around us, until we need them. Are you conscious of the signs of God? Do understand the significance of what he is doing in your life?

Some years ago we had an 18 year old woman who started coming to our church who wasn't a follower of Jesus. One night, the Elders were praying for people, and she asked for prayer. She had been undergoing tests at the hospital, and they had discovered that she had been born without any ovaries. The Doctors told her she could never have children. She was due for some final X-Rays the next day. The Elders couldn't find any

oil that we used for anointing the sick, so they went to the church kitchen and found some disinfectant, and used that instead. They prayed and asked the Lord to heal her. The next day, when the doctors examined her new X-Rays, they found she had two perfect ovaries. She was completely healed. The doctors were absolutely baffled. God had worked a miracle in her body. Now you would think that a miracle like that would cause this young woman to discover the reality of Jesus. But unlike the royal official who believed as a result of the miracle, she didn't. She was delighted that she had been healed. She had seen the miracle, but hadn't understood the sign. It's as if she had read the sign, but never taken the necessary steps to find the destination it was pointing to.

If you look carefully you will find evidences of the work of God all around you. Those evidences are signs to help you believe. Read the signs, exercise faith, and follow them to Jesus.

David McChesney, Westlake Church in Nyon, Switzerland