

Faith; then and now.

During the Enlightenment, when critical study of the Gospels began in earnest, there was a movement amongst some scripture scholars to seek to demystify the Gospels in general and the miracles in particular as simply inventions. With regard to the miracles, their rationalist approach was to conclude that from observation and their own experience of the natural world, “miracles” couldn’t and therefore didn’t happen. The miracles or “mighty works” which appear in the Gospels could they said, be easily and straightforwardly explained away as simply fantastic embellishments created by Jesus’ followers and disciples to enhance his reputation as an extraordinary man. With each re-telling by the disciples, these stories became increasingly fanciful so that by the time the authors of the gospels came to record them and write them down, they had reached quite extraordinary levels of sophistication, to the extent of defying the very laws of physics. Explanations were thus constructed to explain them away; the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves was just Jesus encouraging a vast crowd to share food amongst themselves. The miracle of walking on the water was in fact Jesus walking along the shore line calling to the disciples from the beach. The resurrection was a powerful psychosomatic phenomenon experienced by Mary of Magdala triggered by her extreme loss and grief for the man she loved, and who then managed to convince the apostles as to the veracity of what she had felt and believed had happened to her.

Such views are now no longer prevalent amongst modern serious scripture scholars. Modern day literary technique with its associated critical method, have enabled scholars to explore the gospels in the context of their own time and setting, and thereby bring forth new understandings and insights into how and why the Gospels came to be written. New conclusions have been drawn determining that the presence of the miracle story in the Gospels is not the determinant fact for people’s faith; rather these happenings are fundamental dimensions of the reality of that faith. The Gospels were never embellished biographies of Jesus, since it became clear that the origins of these works and their content lay deeply embedded in the faith and the proclamation of that faith of the communities which produced them, and the stories and deeds which they relate, speak of a faith being constantly tested and challenged by often difficult and unsympathetic circumstances, with aggressive opposition and rivalries which threatened quite simply to destroy them. The miracle is that these communities in spite of all the dangers they faced, managed through the gifts of the Holy Spirit to survive and grow to live out their faith in response to the command of Jesus to love as he had loved.

It is in the light of this faith that we have gathered here this day in community, to pray and to worship. We have come to listen to these stories once more in our setting and in our context and to receive the same sacramental food that they shared which is the body and blood of Jesus Christ. It is in faith that we are called to take that food, that love, out into the world which we inhabit and to share it with those we meet. When we listen the gospel today, our focus is not to hold in our minds a curiosity as to how Jesus was able to defy the effects of gravity and walk on water, but rather our focus is to see in this event, this miracle, our own faith journey being examined and explored. We are to ask ourselves the very same questions that the first Christians asked of themselves, and in the context of where we are in our lives and in our relationships, to respond. *Courage! It is I. Do not be afraid.* Does my faith in Jesus allow me to reply: *Truly, you are the Son of God.*