

Adult Formation Presentation #4

The Signs and Wonders of Jesus

The Gospels record that in the time before Jesus there were a number of individuals who claimed to be the Messiah, but they all came to nothing. I want to talk about the signs and wonders that Jesus worked because they show the difference between Jesus and the false Messiahs. These signs and miracles were not small in number, as critics today seem to imply. Rather Jesus performed a number of visible and public signs and it was not a small number of people who were witness to them. Scholars generally count the signs and wonders to be between 37 and 42, and there might be others.

Paired with this is the fact that unlike the other false Messiahs, Jesus made few, if any, direct claims to be the Messiah. This assertion was made by his Apostles and disciples. What Jesus did do, however, was to silently and sometimes subtly do things that would point to his divine nature. The most common action he did to reveal this was what people in the ancient centuries wanted most from their gods was healing and protection from disease and injury. Healing in any significant way was centuries beyond the ancient world. Rather than claiming he was divine, he showed them by his actions. The most notable occasion when Jesus revealed his divine nature was at the Transfiguration, but that was done on a mountaintop with only about 3 persons watching. And he instructed them to say nothing. . . until he had risen from the dead!

Jesus' message was not that he was the Messiah, but that the Kingdom of God was present. The healings, multiplications of bread, miracles with water and wine, all pointed to a new presence of God in our world. Jesus drew many comparisons between the kingdom of God and other things and he did so because it was in him.

When Jesus began his ministry, besides the ordinary people, he had four separate groups who were waiting for the true Messiah and when this individual came, he had to prove himself to them. Besides that, there was the entire history of the prophets who foretold what the Messiah would be like and what his presence would mean. In addition to his teachings which he aimed at meeting the demands of these groups, his signs and miracles showed him to be the one the prophets awaited as well.

One aspect of these miracles that is worth noting is that there is a progression and a history of Jesus signs and wonders. In the history of the

Chosen people a theme appeared in their Psalms, the prophets and the literature. The focus of this theme was the need for God to become more visible, tangible, audible and physical among them. What they prayed for was a more constant and tangible presentation of God. The first of these presentations of God appeared at the Passover in Egypt. God revealed his power first by striking dead all the first-born of the Egyptians and the next tangible evidence of him was God's command through Moses to the Red Sea to make way for the Israelites but not the Egyptians. The time when the Israelites was in the desert when God showed his presence by a cloud hovering above them by day and a column of fire by night. In the signs and wonders Jesus worked during his ministry, Jesus was giving to the Chosen People precisely what they sought for centuries.

Let's take a look at some of the 35 to 45 signs he worked.

Changing Water into Wine. Jn. 2:1-11

This miracle is mentioned at the beginning of St. John's Gospel and Jesus did it because the wedding the had been invited to at Cana had run out of wine. Informed of this by his mother Mary, Jesus converted the water that was kept in large stone jars for guests to wash their hands into wine. It is a unique miracle and Jesus never did it again.

Jesus had a specific purpose in performing this miracle. The curious thing about this episode is that Saint John does tell us who the bride and groom were at the wedding. This is out of place for Saint John and there is a reason for not mentioning it. The reason is that the wedding is actually between Jesus Christ, who is the bridegroom, and the Church who is his beloved.

In the Old Testament, wine symbolized, joy, peace, prosperity, and the coming of the Messiah. Jesus multiplied wine at Cana to show by this sign that he was the promised Messiah and his reason for coming was to bring the fullness of love for all humanity just as a groom brings that love to his bride. Following upon this Jesus will show how full and intense this love is by feeding, healing, teaching and ultimately giving his life for his bride the Church.

Expelling the Evil Spirit from the man in Capernaum. Jn. 4:43-54

In this second miracle, Jesus goes into a synagogue in Capernaum and discovers a man with an evil spirit. Capernaum was a rather large town just north of the border between Judah in the South and Samaria in

the north. Samaria was no longer worshipping in Jerusalem and there was much hostility between the two. Most in Judah thought that the Samaritans were sinful, heretical faithless people who were condemned. Jesus performs this expulsion of demons to show the Southerners that he had power over evil and could bring the Israelites back to the Temple. But he also reveals that the demons, evil spirits and even Satan knew that he is the Son of God who has become incarnate. They are fearful of him because they know that he is not just a man, but is divine and that he has the demons, but they don't know what he is going to do. The people are different. They know what Jesus is doing, but they don't know who or what he is.

Healing of the Lepers Mt. 8:1-4

In this episode, Jesus reveals that he wants to heal these outcasts and he will use his extraordinary powers to do so. He tells them to obey the Law about their condition. He is afraid the people will see him as just a magic healer and miss his message that the Kingdom of God is here. Leprosy was seen as not a medical condition, but as a spiritual and moral condition that needed healing as well. If any physical ailment portrayed sin clearly and powerfully, it would be leprosy, and by abolishing this terrible disease, Jesus made it clear that he had come to eliminate and destroy sin.

Jesus Heals Peter's Mother-in-law Mt. 8:14-15.

In this episode, Jesus goes to the home of Peter and "threatens" the fever in her. Elsewhere when Jesus confronted other demons and even the winds and seas, he threatened both of these. This is unique to Luke's Gospel that Jesus is the suffering servant who is a threat to all those who will harm the people he has chosen to be his own. This was seen in the victory at the Red Sea. In threatening to do evil, Jesus is declaring the final struggle with evil is about to commence and that he has power over it. Peter was of course the first Apostle called by Jesus and he was very close to Jesus. Peter spoke often to Jesus about many things and Peter was certainly a friend of the Lord. Healing his mother-in-law, he was saying that if you draw close to Jesus, he will be generous in his gifts of healing.

The First Miraculous Catch of Fish Lk: 5:1-11

The Jews of Jesus time considered the seas to be the dwelling of Satan. All of the vicious monsters there were merely the sinners who had been washed away in Noah's flood. It contains all of the forces that are opposed to God. To catch the creatures trapped in the seas is to lift men

from the empire of evil. Jeremiah saw that role in 16"15-16. For Luke, some are commissioned to go out and do this. We can be engulfed by demonic forces and Christ can lift us out of it. And having just summoned Peter to be the leader of the Apostles, the miraculous draft of fish was a sign to him that he will experience miraculous results in summoning people to Christ.

Healing of the Centurion's Servant Mt: 8:5-13

What is striking about this miracle is that it occurs at a distance. In many of the other miraculous signs, Jesus either touched the healed person in some fashion or spoke to them directly. In this case, physical proximity is not necessary, and Jesus heals the boy by speaking words that the boy himself would never hear. This miracle was done to show that his word itself carried the power, blessings and grace of God. St. Luke makes a point that the father of the boy is clearly a Gentile, and he is showing that the power of God extends beyond the Chosen People to even the Gentiles. The centurion shows that Jesus is not involved in magic or incantation but has a power within himself to heal. Christian rites are very far from magic here.

Jesus heals a man through a hole in the roof Mt. 9:1-8

In this healing, Jesus is making a number of points. In the crowded circumstances, the man cannot come to Jesus, so his friends help him to get within earshot of him. More importantly, it is the community who aids those in need of Jesus' healing power. The community engages in the struggle to have Jesus' powers manifested. But in addition, the man is forgiven not only because of his repentance, but the repentance of the community. Jesus is pointing out the role of the community in the healings. The men who carried him to Jesus, struggled to get the man up on the roof of the house and lowered him down were doing the work of disciples: bringing those in need of God's grace into the healing power of Christ.

Jesus heals many sick that evening Mt. 8:16-17

In this miracle after healing Peter's mother-in-law, who is a devout and faithful Jew, Jesus goes out to find many Gentiles, Samaritans, and those who have been excluded from worshipping with the Chosen People. Jesus heals them because he sees their faith and because of this, their healing means that they are being invited to the heavenly banquet. They too will be called to the Eucharistic banquet just as the Jews and what enables all of them to come to the banquet is their faith. This miracle is a

counterpoint to the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. He came to heal not just the special chosen ones, but all people.

Jesus heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath Mt 12:9-14

In this miracle, Jesus enters a synagogue on the Sabbath and finds a man with a withered hand. Because it was the Sabbath, he was not allowed by the Law to do any labor or work according to some Pharisees and Sadducees. But Jesus points out that one can save the life of an injured animal on the Sabbath. But there are two other more important messages in this action. First, if Jesus was evil and Satanic, he would not go into a Synagogue, much less would he do something like restore the health of one who has suffered long. Also, by working a miracle on the Sabbath, he is trying to show that he is of God. If he were evil, God would certainly bless the gesture with success.

Revivification of Widow's Son Lk. 7:11-17

Saint Luke is the only one to mention this healing and he does so because there is a special meaning to the action. To the Temple priests the Pharisees and the Sadducees Jesus came as their promised one and he came to bring a new Covenant with God that would fulfill the Old Covenant given them by Moses. By the time of Jesus, the people of the Mosaic Covenant had become worn and beaten. They had been overrun by kingdom after kingdom and the Chosen people were becoming more and more feeble. The Pharisees and Sadducees had returned the people to faithfulness to the Old Law and its commandments, but the Chosen People needed an injection of new Life. Jews had come to populate the Roman empire but its citizens were not seeing the truth and beauty of the Old Covenant and were clinging to their old ways.

The old and lonely widow leading her only son to his burial was an apt symbol of the condition of the Chosen People at that time. They needed an injection of new life. They needed new teachings, goals and objectives to put life back into their faith. They needed to know with clarity and certainty where they were destined. But more than anything else, they needed clear, visible and powerful signs that in their weakness and fear, that God was still their life and hope.

Raising the young man back to life was a clear sign that God had come to drive out fear, sadness and death. The miracle makes the stark point that God is still close to his people and guiding him. By this action of putting life back into the man, Jesus came to put life back into the Chosen

People. We would see this new life because Peter and Paul would go forth in new and powerful ways to draw the peoples and nations to the worship of the one true God. The raising of this man would indicate that God would reveal himself not just to the Chosen People but to all people in powerful, visible and meaningful ways.

Healing the hemorrhaging woman Mk. 5:25-34.

The three synoptic Gospels all report the episode of Jesus healing the woman with a hemorrhage. The circumstances of this are different in each of the three Synoptic Gospels and in each of them there is a different message accompanying the healing. In St. Matthew's account, Jesus has been summoned by a synagogue official to heal his daughter who is gravely ill. Immediately Jesus turns and rushes to save the girl. The Synagogue official was probably appointed by the Temple priests and was most likely wealthy, educated and influential. And while Jesus is rushing to heal her a woman in the crowd deliberately brushes against him to tap his healing powers. She had been hemorrhaging for a long, long time and had been bankrupted by charges from healers. She was a symbol of Israel that had its "life blood" plundered by the world and needed new blood. Her healing was reported by all the Synoptics to point out that Jesus would shed his blood on the Cross that was new and life giving. It was also reported that in taking the chalice which is the blood of Christ, it gives us new life just as this woman received new life.

This is an important miracle because it is the first hint of the Eucharist and of the new life that would come from drinking the blood of Christ. This was an important miracle because it pointed to the Eucharist and it showed why Christ had to shed his blood for us. This woman had not received the life-giving blood of God and the only blood she had left her weak, poor and sickly. By touching Christ she was showing that alone in this world had the blood that healed us and gave us life.

Rendering a bush barren Mk. 11:12-14

In one of the more peculiar miracles, Jesus was walking along and he got hungry. He saw a bush that appeared to be healthy and full of fruit. But when he got closer to it he saw that there was nothing from it that he could eat and he cursed it. As a result, the bush withered and died before him. This was a sign to those who appear to have a strong faith and trust in Christ, but in fact do not and have an outward appearance of being faithful obedient to God and loving, but this is not the truth.

The truth of the fig tree is that it was beautiful for the eye to behold but there was nothing within it to foster life. The parable tells us that people who are like that tree are beyond the reach of God's grace. There is nothing that Christ can do to turn them into life-giving individuals. Those who just settle with appearing to be godly, obedient to God and filled with faith but in truth are not cannot be saved. All that can be done with them is to condemn them, separate them and not let their contagion ruin others.

Multiplying the Loaves for 5,000 Lk. 9:10-17

If there was anything that spread knowledge and the fame of Jesus it would have been his multiplication of the loaves and fishes. Jesus asks a crowd of about 5,000 men to recline on the grassy hills. Then he distributed loaves and fishes to them and they were all satisfied. John notes that the crowd was satisfied and were unlike the Hebrews in the desert who were continually complaining about the food. Jesus clearly did this to show that he was able to do what God did for the Hebrews in the desert because he was divine himself.

The manna that God gave to them in the desert every morning was a sign that God would be faithful to them. In Jesus' miracles of the loaves and fishes, these became signs that God would be faithful to his disciples. And the presence of God in their midst would be like the loaves and fishes that Jesus gave them. It would be something that pleased them and they welcomed it. But along with the multiplication of the loaves, the fishes were multiplied as well. Jesus did this to illustrate to the people that God would be with them not just at the breaking of the bread and in the Eucharistic gathering, but in the gathering in of the peoples of the world in faith. The spirit of God with all of its support and protection depended on the people not only having and expressing their love and faith in God, but in going out as missionaries to bring the people to worship and bring others to faith.

Walking on water in night. Mt.14:22-33.

In this particular miracle, Christ had been teaching all day and healing many people by the Sea of Galilee. At the end of the day, he told the Apostles to get in a boat with him because he wanted to go to the other side of the lake. The crowds were so great that taking a boat there was much better. But in the middle of the night, when it was darkest, a squall came up and they often did then. We should remember that in the ancient world many people did not know how to swim, and the seas and oceans were filled with horrible creatures. The darkness and the stormy waters

terrified the Apostles and with reason they feared dying. In their terror, Jesus calmed the seas and saved their lives.

This is not only a story of Jesus intervening in nature, life and history to protect those who would communicate him to the world, it is a story of Jesus possessing the divine power to free us from fear of the darkness of sin and death. But it is also a story of Jesus, the Logos through whom the world was created, is the master of not just our spiritual world, but creation as well.

Saving Centurion's Daughter. Lk.7: 1-10

In an episode recorded in St. Luke's Gospel, Jesus enters Capernaum and there a Roman centurion comes to him asking that he heal his servant. Surprisingly he is popular among the Jews because he undertook efforts to rebuild their synagogue. The Centurion heard some of the Jewish leaders speaking of him and he sent one of these elders to come to Jesus and ask him to heal the servant. The Synagogue leaders pointed out that the Centurion loved and honored the Jews and they said he deserved the gesture. Jesus declared to the crowd that was gathered before him and he praised the faith of the Centurion and when the man sent by the Centurion returned, the servant was well.

Jesus certainly did this healing to reward the Centurion for his faith, but he had other motives for it. Jesus would declare that he would become the new temple, the new place where a saving sacrifice would be offered for sins and that the Jerusalem Temple would be reduced to rubble. In this miracle, Jesus is declaring by it that the old Temple will fall not because it is false and evil but that it has prepared the way for a new and more perfect temple. The blood that was shed in the old Temple would not certainly bring forgiveness of sins, eternal life and peace because it was the blood of animals. The blood that was shed by Jesus was the blood of the God man. Unlike the blood of animals, this blood carried divine life and its offering would bring eternal life.

Healing a Cripple Jn: 5: 1-16.

All three of the Synoptics report the healing of the paralytic man by Jesus. Jesus performed this miracle because throughout the Old Testament the prophets repeatedly called on the Chosen People to walk in the ways of the Lord. And the one time in which this was done by the entire people was when they were in the desert seeking to enter the Promised Land. At that time, God was closer and more visible to them than he had

ever been. Jesus healed this man to show that the time had come when the Chosen People could obey the prophets command and recover their power to walk in the ways of the Lord. He also did this miracle to show the Chosen People that God was as close to them because of the Incarnation as God was when they crossed the desert with the cloud and pillar of fire leading them.

Healing the deaf man. Mk. 7:31-37.

Jesus touches a deaf man's ears with his fingers, and he restores the man's power to speak by putting his saliva on his tongue. The reason for doing this was that over the centuries the prophets seemed to be totally deaf to their words and they could not obey what they could not hear. And those who were struck mute were unable to address and lift up their prayers to them. They could not utter words of thanks and praise to God. Jesus also healed them of their deafness so that they could hear the prayers lifted up by others at the Eucharist. The mute wished to be able to speak again to offer prayers and sing songs in community with others.

Raising of Lazarus. Jn. 11:38-44

In St. John's Gospel, he recounts the raising of Lazarus from the dead. He was the third person whom Jesus had raised. The first was son of the widow of Naim, the second was the Centurion's daughter and Lazarus was the last. This was Jesus' final revivification and it was such a bold and powerful expression of who he was and what his powers were that it convinced the Pharisees that he had to be eliminated. This was a bold and powerful expression to his doubters and detractors which emphatically laid to rest their doubts about him. If Jesus had only raised one person, it would be easy to say that the person wasn't really dead and his revivification was a freak accident. But if this was done a second time to a person who was certainly dead, it would be easy to begin to think that there might be something to his claim. But to do this a third time would pretty much settle in doubter's minds that there was a special power in the individual doing this.

In this sign, Jesus showed that the power to restore life is intrinsic to him. He does not go through an arcane ritual. He does not speak in new and different tongues. He simply tells Lazarus to exit the tomb. Lazarus was so dead that the stench was beginning and when he exited the tomb, he showed no unusual changes. Also, we are told that Jesus and Lazarus

came together for a banquet at a later date and nothing unusual was seen in him.

Post-Resurrection Appearances

I believe these were some of the most remarkable signs and wonders Christ revealed. We are told that he remained with the community for 40 days, which signifies that he remained with them for a sufficient and long period of time. His appearances became commonplace. Just before his Ascension we are told that his appearances became so common that the Apostles they were no longer startled when they saw them. And his appearances were not just to his inner circle but to many others. It is clear that he did this to build trust in the minds and hearts of his disciples that he truly had risen from the dead.

The appearances were of different kinds, but there was a common them to them all. Prior to his Resurrection, he subjected himself to all of the natural forces and constraints that are subject to. But after his Resurrection he was the master of these forces. For example, when he wished to appear to the Apostles, he made himself capable of passing through solid objects. When he appeared to Mary Magdalene on the morning of the Resurrection, he was able to cloak his identity and she could not recognize this. This also happened to Cleopas and his wife when they were on the road to Emmaus. They thought they were speaking to a stranger who knew nothing of the crucifixion of Jesus. But at the Breaking of the Bread with them he suddenly appeared and was recognized for who he was. Jesus did this precisely because he wanted to demonstrate that as the Word of God he shared in the Father's mission of creating and establishing the world

He also engaged in these activities because in doing these things, he was showing that he really did have the ability to raise from the dead. While hanging on the Cross before his death the "good thief" pleaded with Jesus to be admitted into his kingdom, and Jesus declared that the thief would. In his appearances after that he showed he had that power.

Road to Emmaus

We are told that later on in the morning on the day of the Resurrection, Cleopas and his wife were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus. As they walked, they were trying to understand the events of the previous day, mainly the Crucifixion of Jesus. Elsewhere in the Gospel, we are told that his wife was Mary of Cleopas, and she remained at the foot of

the Cross long with the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene until Christ died on the Cross. They were both very solid disciples of Jesus, hoping he was the Messiah and when he was crucified as a criminal, blasphemer and slave on Calvary, it is likely that all their hopes were dashed.

Jesus joins them on the journey, but his identity is cloaked. In their 7 mile trip, Jesus was able to explain to them how Jesus fulfilled all of the hopes and prophecies of the Messiah. This is an excellent example of the control Jesus had over the material world. In his resurrected form, all of creation was under his authority once again. But the real sign came when Jesus sat at table with two of his most faithful and serious disciples. At the point where the bread was broken among them, his real identity was revealed to them they saw him for what he truly was.

This happened because they were trying to understand how everything fit together after his crucifixion and the sign enabled them to preach the Resurrected Lord to the world. The couple then went from Emmaus to the Apostles in the upper room and declared to them that they had seen the Risen Lord. This declaration showed their real intentions which were to become “fishers of men” and gather people to him in faith.

The Resurrection

The final miracle of Jesus, of course, was the resurrection. This was a sign or miracle that no other human was able to do, but Jesus accomplished it by reason of his divine and human nature. No one actually saw Jesus emerge from the tomb, even though there were two soldiers stationed outside. They claimed to be asleep but it is doubtful they would claim that because they would have been executed for that. Showing later how he could alter his physical appearances, he was invisible when the stone was moved away and he emerged. This led to multiple appearances to many of the faithful and even to those who had abandoned him.

The Miraculous catch of Fish in the Sea of Tiberius.

In this episode, Jesus appears bodily after the Resurrection to the Apostles after the Resurrection. His bodily appearance points out again that he has control over created matter and can use it for any holy purpose he may have in mind. Earlier in his ministry, he gained a large catch of fish for them. He did this as a sign to them that he was calling them to be missionaries, to go out into the world and proclaim him as our Savior and Redeemer. In this miracle, Jesus again appears in his body in order to bring back to them the moment when he first multiplied their catch. He is

going back to that in exactly the form he was in at the first occasion, but now as the Resurrected and glorified Lord, he is repeating the event to demonstrate to them that his earlier promise is still valid. What the Apostles may have considered a mere human hope at the first multiplication, has become a divine promise made by God to them.