

St. Mary's Sermon Series

Acts 9:36-43

**Spiritual gifts:
Miraculous powers**

On page 93 of his book, *Know your spiritual gifts*, Mark Stibbe defines the gift of miraculous powers as: “*The special ability to perform acts of extra ordinary supernatural power. These actions are performed through the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus Christ and they evoke wonder in many and faith in some*”.

There is only one place that we can begin to look at this particular gift with any degree of certainty and that is in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. According to the gospels, throughout the course of his three year ministry, Jesus performed numerous miraculous works which were public demonstrations of extraordinary Charismatic power. We can divide these miracles into three different and distinct categories:

Firstly, we have three accounts of Jesus carrying out ***resurrection miracles***. These were: Jairus’ daughter, the son of the widow of Nain and, of course, Lazarus. These were not permanent resurrections from death because each of the people concerned did eventually die again.

Secondly, there are ***nature miracles***. We are told that the very first miracle that Jesus carried out was to turn water into wine at the wedding in Cana and we also know that he multiplied the loaves and the fishes to feed five thousand men plus woman and children and he also stilled the storm.

The third category is ***healing miracles***. A couple of weeks ago, we looked, in some detail, at the gifts of healing and we saw that Jesus was, immediately, able to heal all manner of serious physical and mental problems.

In all three categories there are several common denominators. These were:

- They were public
- They were immediate
- They were dramatic
- They evoked wonder and awe
- They involved radical transformation.

From this, it can be observed that not all healings can be classified as miraculous works. In the church we should see all manner of healings taking place all the time. The very first healing, should be considered at a basic level a general healing, is that of salvation, which occurs when people come to faith in Jesus and give their lives to him. We should also see relational healing taking place, where people, with apparently irreconcilable differences, come together in mutual forgiveness and acceptance. Then there is what we might describe as low key healing, which can take place over a period of time, along with psychological healing, which is the healing of low self worth, past wounds, trauma, abuse and addictions as well as spiritual healing where people are set free from demonic influences.

None of these events are necessarily miraculous works; they are more likely to be less visible, less dramatic, less immediate *but*, none the less real. Whether the miracle take place immediately or over a period of time, faith is essential. In his book, Mark Stibbe concludes that, “*Faith precedes, accompanies and ensues the exercise of both the healing and the miraculous gifts. Faith, healings and miracles are related gifts of power*”.

I deliberately chose the healing of Dorcus, also known as Tabitha, from Acts chapter 9 as our reading this morning as it is an example of the apostles learning from the ministry of their master Jesus. There are very clear similarities in this account of what Peter does and the account of what Jesus does when he raised Jarius’ daughter (Luke ch. 8).

The first important thing to note about this story, is that Luke tells us that Dorcus was a widow and, by implication, that she was also poor.

It is obvious that Peter was greatly impressed by Jesus’ ministry to Jarius’ daughter so, faced with a similar incident, he copies what he saw his master do. Like Jesus, Peter dismisses all the mourners from the room and utters a word of command for the person to get up. In fact, the words in the original Aramaic are remarkably similar to those Jesus used. Like Jesus, Peter also takes hold of the girl’s hand. This is all clear evidence that Peter, having been in the room when Jesus raised Jarius’ daughter, had learned how to operate the Jesus way.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable things about this whole account, which it would be very easy for us to completely overlook is, that it was not easy, for a Jew like Peter, to enter a room where a corpse lay. Even though Tabitha’s body had been carefully washed under the law of the day, Peter would still have been considered to have been defiled by coming into contact with it. Yet the compassion and love of God clearly welled up inside Peter, to such an extent, that he was able to overcome the prejudices associated with his religious upbringing. Another sign that Peter was overcoming the problems caused by his zealous upbringing, is evident in the fact that he went to stay in Simon’s house whom, we are told, was a tanner (i.e. someone who worked with the skins of dead animals).

As I have mention in previous sermons, there have been a couple of occasions in my own family, when we have seen God at work with healing power, but I have to say that, if we are sticking strictly to Mark Stibbe’s definition, I personally have not witnessed, at first hand, God at work through miraculous power. Having said that I have not witnessed this gift at work does not mean that I do not believe that God can and does exercise this gift today.

Let me give you a couple of modern day examples:

I remember reading the story of Benson, who became a Christian through the witness of some English missionaries in Africa in the late 70’s or early 80’s. The missionaries who lead him to the lord gave him a copy of the Bible. After reading the account of Jesus raising Jarius’ daughter, Benson rode on his bike from village to village asking if there was anyone who had died there and he raised nine people to life again before the missionaries told him that this was not the way things were done in present times.

I have also seen a remarkable film of a church, in Latin America, which is situated on the side of a massive rubbish dump. In 1972 they decided to provide a Christmas dinner for the poor people who scavenged a living on the tip. They catered for 100 people, but well over 300 people turned up. Initially, the church leaders panicked not knowing what to do, but eventually they prayed and continued to serve the food until everyone had had sufficient to eat. The leaders said that it was remarkable that they were able to keep cutting slices off the joints of meat which never seemed to get any smaller!

If you want to read further accounts of recent miracles then I would recommend Mahesh Chavada's book "*Only love can make a miracle*", which includes a medically attested account of a six year old boy being brought back to life again.

The one thing that I can conclude from these modern day examples is that miracles occur in the context of great need. There are many more reports of miraculous works in the poorer nations than there are in the, so called, first world countries. One obvious reason for this is the lack of good quality free health care in those countries which leads to a greater sense of desperation. In rich nations there is a far greater sense of self sufficiency. **Clearly God does great things for those who expect great things of him.**

Of course, miracles don't always happen, even when people of great faith pray for them; we must always remember that God is sovereign. Even Paul was not healed from his thorn in the flesh. I fully agree with Mark Stibbe when he writes, "*I would rather be a member of a church where people dared ask God for a miracle rather than one that never asked at all. I would rather be a member of a church characterized by a simple faith than a member of a church characterised by sophisticated scepticism. As John Wimber pointed out, many years ago, 'No one in the New Testament ever got healed in response to the words: your scepticism has made you well.'*" (Know your spiritual gifts page 109)

I find these accounts of miracles to be highly challenging to the church in the Western world. Jesus told his disciples that they would do even greater work than he did (John 14). God he has not changed, so clearly the problem is not on his side but on ours. The question for us is, how big is our God? Can he still move the mountains? Have we placed limits on what he can and cannot do?