

## Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

Wis 1:13-15, 2:23-24

Ps 29:2, 4-6, 11-13

2 Cor 8:7, 9, 13-15

Mark 5:21-43

When I was a much younger man—and studying history at university—I once took a unit on the history of the Reformation (I was the only person with a Catholic background in the class, a fact I more-or-less kept to myself). One day for some reason the topic of the virgin birth of Jesus came up in conversation, and I remember a middle-aged woman flatly declaring that it was nonsense, because—*quote*—“it just doesn’t happen that way.” Even though I had drifted a fair ways from the Church by this point, I distinctly remember thinking, “Well, people don’t rise from the dead either, but without *that* Christianity doesn’t even get off the ground.”

But this woman had raised a common objection to the sort of miraculous accounts that we’ve just heard in our Gospel passage. “How can we possibly believe them?” After all, they seem to contradict everything we know about science and the natural world.

We can trace the roots of much of this scepticism back to the Enlightenment of the 18th century. Unlike the fashionable atheists of today—who would say that anything relating to God is nothing more than a fairy tale—many of the most prominent Enlightenment thinkers were Deists, which is to say that they believed in the existence of a supreme being, but they also held that, following the great act of creation, this supreme being did not intervene in the universe he had made. In other words, their notion of God was like that of a great watchmaker – he had put together this fantastically intricate device, set it in motion, and then stepped back and allowed the laws of physics and so forth to keep things running smoothly.

Thomas Jefferson—one of the most influential Deists—went so far as to take scissors and cut all the supernatural stories right out of his Bible, leaving only the moral teaching of Jesus. Others chose to keep their Bible intact, but they read the miracle stories with a nod and a wink, just like they read Greek mythology. They still believed in God, but when it came to miracles they were just too sophisticated and rational to take such primitive fantasies literally. Because—after all—*it just doesn’t happen that way*.

And if we’re honest, our own thinking about supernatural phenomena such as miracles has probably been heavily influenced by this kind of scepticism. Chances are, we don’t quite know *what* to think about the miracles of Jesus. We may not want to dismiss them out of hand, and yet we struggle to completely believe them either. Could they really have happened? Did Jesus really bring a young girl back to life after she had died?

To be fair, the Enlightenment sceptics did raise a good question. If God created everything—including the laws of nature—why would he then violate the very natural laws he had created by performing miracles? What would be the point of that? If such ongoing intervention was truly necessary, surely it would mean that the original creation wasn't all that good in the first place. That's hardly the sort of thing we want to be saying about the supreme creator.

Well, our first reading from the Book of Wisdom suggests an answer to this quandary. It declares plainly that death was *not* part of the original creation. God designed human beings to live forever. It was by the envy of the devil that death came into the world, and when our first parents chose to turn away from God's perfect plan, the spiritual death that resulted had a disastrous impact on the whole of creation. In other words, death and decay—and the related sufferings of this fallen world—are not really so “natural” after all.

Gottfried Leibniz—one of the foremost Enlightenment philosophers—had argued that that the world we live in was the best of all possible worlds. But the Books of Genesis and Wisdom would beg to differ. The Garden of Eden was the best of all possible worlds, but—after the Fall—*nature itself* became tainted – still good, but broken.

So *perhaps*, by performing miracles—and seemingly *defying* the laws of nature—it might actually be the case that God is *restoring* nature – *rescuing* his creation from the degradation and misery that sin has let loose in the world, and—for a brief moment—allowing the perfection of his original creation to shine forth once more.

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G. K. Chesterton once gave a characteristically lucid observation about the concept of miracles when discussing the famous incident of Saint Francis offering to walk through fire to try to convert the Sultan of Egypt. Here's what Chesterton said:

“Whether a man believes that fire in one case *could fail* to burn depends on why he thinks it generally *does* burn. If it burns nine sticks out of ten because it is its nature or doom to do so, then it will burn the tenth stick as well. If it burns nine sticks because it is the *will of God* that it should, then it *might* be the will of God that the tenth should be *unburned*. Nobody can get behind that fundamental difference about the reason of things; and it is as rational for a theist to believe in miracles as for an atheist to disbelieve in them. In other words there is only one intelligent reason why a man does not believe in miracles and that is that he *does* believe in materialism.” – G. K. Chesterton, “St Francis of Assisi” (Chapter IX)

Suffice to say, we Christians are not blunt materialists. We believe that there is more to this world than meets the eye. And the God we worship is not just a glorified watchmaker, who set the universe in motion then stood back to admire his work. No,

God sustains and guides every aspect of creation at every single instant. If he ever ceased in this sustaining work, we would instantly cease to be.

And while there is certainly a divine order inherent within creation, we must never forget that God's ways are not our ways – and our inability to conceive of the miraculous should not blind us from an incontrovertible truth: that *everything* God touches is miraculous. And if he occasionally chooses to paint in strokes that our small minds struggle to believe, it's worth remembering the words that the Archangel Gabriel said to Mary at the Annunciation: "Nothing is impossible for God."

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This, I believe, is the point of Jesus' miracles in the Gospels. When we hear of Jesus calming the storm, or healing the woman with the flow of blood, or raising the daughter of Jairus from the dead, we realise that we are in the presence of *Mystery*. Our God—unlike the mythical gods of antiquity—has no beginning or end. He was, He is, and He is to come. The one true God is transcendent; above nature; *super-natural*.

Jesus does not plead or conjure or recite incantations. He doesn't trick us with fancy illusions. He does supernatural things, not through manipulation, but by a word of command. Sophisticated scepticism is an inadequate response on our part. So is fear. If we want to experience the saving, life-giving power that he offers us, the only appropriate response is *faith*. In the face of the tragedies and challenges of this fallen world, genuine faith says this: "I can't, but *he can*... and I think I'll let him."

And think about this. Many fathers would have had sick children in Galilee on that day two thousand years ago. But only Jairus had faith that Jesus could do something about it – and so he asked him to, despite the ridicule of his friends. And many passers-by would have brushed against Jesus that day as he made his way through the crowd. But only one of them had faith that Jesus could heal her, and thus reached out boldly to touch him.

In a similar way, *we* are in the presence of Jesus and his life-changing power at every Eucharist we celebrate. But just as many people bumped into Jesus in the square but were too busy to notice, or too jaded to expect anything, so too perhaps many Catholics shuffle forward in the communion line expecting little more than a piece of bread or a quaint ritual.

Like Jairus, and the troubled woman, we also need the eyes of faith to recognise Our Lord when we're in his presence. Because maybe—just maybe—what the Church teaches about the Eucharist is actually true, and we get to witness a miracle at every Mass. Maybe it *really is* the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ in that little host.

Perhaps it's wishful thinking. Perhaps it really is impossible, or ridiculous, or too good to be true. Or maybe it actually *is* as Gabriel had said to Mary... that "nothing is impossible for God."