



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 22nd, 2010

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

It is rather difficult to square the Gospel accounts of Jesus' miracles with St. Paul's contention that the New Testament is so much more glorious than the Old. I mean there is no doubt that Jesus' miracles are . . . well . . . miraculous. But the fact of the matter is that compared with the miracles of the Old Testament, they lack the certain *je ne sais quoi* that, for want of a better expression, Americans call *pizzazz*.

Take the miracle described in the Communion Gospel appointed for the 13th Sunday After Pentecost, under Year "C" of the Common Lectionary, St. Luke's account of his healing of a woman afflicted with scoliosis. All he does is lay his hands on her and say: "Woman, you are released from your infirmity."

That's all there is to it. The woman, who had been all bent over and scrunched up for 18 years, stands up straight, gives thanks to God – and everything is over bar the shouting. What's more, the miracle that's related in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer is no more dramatic. It might well be described as similarly prosaic.

It is St. Mark's account of the healing of deaf man who had a speech impediment. Jesus simply sticks his fingers in the deaf man's ears, then spits on his fingers and touches the guy's tongue. There's nothing very glorious about that. If anything, it sounds a bit unsanitary.

Contrast these two miracles with the miracles God performs in the O(ld Testament. He parts the Red Sea so that the Children of Israel can cross it dry-shod. He

makes the sun stand still in the heavens so Israelites can win a battle. He knocks down the walls of Jericho to save them the bother of storming them. Now those are really impressive miracles. Indeed, they truly qualify as miracles with pizzazz.

Search as one might, the New Testament very has little to compare with them. I guess you could argue that the Virgin Birth was quite impressive, especially the bit about the angel choirs. But the only people there to witness it were a bunch of horny-handed sons of toil from the local sheep-herding operation. And while the resurrection was quite astounding, the only people present – a infantry squad – slept all the way through it.

Even Jesus' most spectacular miracles are decidedly low key. When he raises folks from the dead there is no *shazzam!* about it. At the little town of Nain, he simply walks up to the corpse and say: "Okay kid, get up." And the raising of Lazarus is more of the same. There is this huge crowd in the graveyard waiting for something really special and all Jesus does is shout: "Hey Lazarus come out."

His miraculous feedings are really quite impressive, of course. It's hard not to be impressed by the feeding of 4,000 and 5,000 thousand men and their families with a few loaves of bread and a couple of smoked fish. But why, when he has all the power in the universe at his command, did he give them a tuna sandwich when it would have been just as easy for him to lay on a seven course meal, accompanied by the appropriate wines and cordials?

St Paul addresses this issue in the third chapter of II Corinthians – people who find God incarnate in the New Testament – Jesus – far less impressive than God as he is portrayed in the Old Testament. Paul says we need to look beyond the pizzazz – the thunder and lightning, the crashing of city walls and the parting of seas. If you study how God acts when incarnate in human flesh, he tell us, we'll discover he's not merely impressive; he's utterly breath taking.

Part of the trouble is that we tend to picture him as being rather like ourselves only larger, infinitely powerful – with all what we consider to be our virtues and none of what we consider to be our vices. Yet God, through the prophet Isaiah, tells us that he is nothing like us; that his thoughts are not our thoughts and his ways are not our ways. And nowhere is this any more apparent than in the four gospels.

One reason we might find Jesus less than impressive is we tend to confuse human ideas of glory with God's idea of glory. The Gospels show they are by no means the same. God's notions of glory differ from ours because he doesn't need pomp and circumstance. Infinite power is ever at his fingertips. All he needs to is utter the word and it is instantly done. For human beings, god-like powers would be astounding – all the superlatives you can imagine. But for God, infinite power is an everyday thing: as natural for him as turning on a faucet is for us.

This is graphically illustrated in the remarkably unassuming way he goes about healing the deaf man and the woman with scoliosis. There's no song and dance, no lengthy prayers, no effort to impress the onlookers. In the case of the deaf man, Jesus simply takes him aside, puts his fingers in his ears, spits on his fingers, touches the man's tongue and says: "Open up."

What could be more modest? Yet what followed was a miracle of creation – an act in microcosm as astounding as the creation of the universe. Miraculously, the man's malformed aural passages were opened and his eardrums were recreated. Miraculously, the string of his tongue was loosed, as the Authorized Version of the Bible so poetically puts it.

Doctors today might possibly be able to recreate this miracle of healing. But they would be forced to rely on scalpels, lasers, blood transfusions and the like. They couldn't do it as Jesus did it – by uttering a solitary word.

But just because our notions of glory don't seem to matter to him, it doesn't mean that glorifying God shouldn't matter to us. In fact, it is absolutely vital for our spiritual welfare – for our very salvation – that we acknowledge God's glory and power, dominion and majesty at every possible opportunity. Indeed, if we forget it even for an instant we put ourselves in mortal danger. The trouble is that if we fail to ascribe to God glory and power, dominion and majesty we'll begin to lose sight of who he is in relationship to ourselves.

God, we are told, walked and talked with Adam and Eve. And he was so disarmingly modest – just like Jesus in First Century Judea – they forgot he was their creator. Mistaking his modesty for inadequacy, they decided they could do his job better than he can. And we slither just as easily as they did into such foolish assumptions.

Today's gospel illustrates how we do so: The man Jesus healed was probably both a gentile and a beggar; the woman was, well, simply a woman. To the people with Jesus, they were folks of no account. And to see the person they had hailed as the Messiah having dealings with such trashy, unimportant people lowered him vastly in their estimation.

One of the most difficult things for us to accept is that all of us, without exception, are equal in Jesus' eyes. He can look at the most dishonest crook, the most corrupt politician, the most unscrupulous billionaire and the most disgusting beggar and see lost sheep as dear to him as any of us who earnestly strive after virtue.

If we lose sight of who he is and, instead, look solely at the company he keeps and flawed human instruments he uses, we will succumb as readily as Adam and Eve to the notion that we can do his job better than he can.

For this reason, we can't afford to be casual in our worship. To be sure, God doesn't need finely honed words, glorious music or gorgeous vestments. He is just as happy to meet us in hovels as in palaces. We are the ones who need the splendor. We need the splendor and the glory to remind us of who God really is – and, no less important, just who we are in relation to him.
AMEN.

***To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever.
AMEN.***