

**'For everything a season':  
Theology through the church year  
Session 4: Epiphany – *Dream on ...***



Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him ... (John 2: 11)

## **Introduction**

Last time we discussed how the season of Epiphany is associated with three 'wonders': the journey of the Magi; the baptism of Christ and the miracle at Cana. This talk focuses on a particular theological issue the season of Epiphany brings into focus: the idea of miracles. The word 'miracle' comes from the Latin 'miraculum' – 'object of wonder'.

### **1. Miracles in the life of Christ**

In the Gospels, miraculous events are associated with the life of Jesus: many involve healings, but there are others: walking on water; calming a storm; turning water into wine. The idea of the miraculous is not unique to Christianity, but it is clear that miracles play a central part in way that Christ's teaching has been received.

### **2. Philosophical background**

What do we mean by the term 'miracle'? The standard definition philosophers use comes from David Hume, 18<sup>th</sup> Century Scottish philosopher, and known sceptic about religion:

'A transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent' (*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Ch. X)

In other words, a miracle is something that does not happen in the normal run of events, it can only be explained by invoking a 'supernatural' cause (although on this definition, this doesn't have to be God).

An alternative definition of 'miracle' has been offered, focusing more on the human significance of miracles. On this view, a miracle is 'an extraordinary coincidence of a beneficial nature interpreted religiously'. The human significance of miracles is their rootedness in the coincidence of events (attributable in natural terms to 'luck'), and their capacity to instill feelings of 'awe' and 'gratitude' in those who experience or witness them (R F Holland, 'Miracles').

### **3. What do miracles prove?**

Hume argued that belief in miracles could not be a 'just foundation' for religion, in part because human testimony about miracles was insufficient to prove that miracles occur. In what sense do we think that belief in miracles is a 'foundation' for our faith, and how does this link to our liturgical celebrations this season?

#### **3.1 Miracles leading to belief**

The most straightforward effect of a miracle is a belief in God or 'some other invisible agent', to use Hume's phrase. Miracles are recorded as having this effect in the gospels (Jn. 2: 11; 11: 45), but not universally (Jn. 12: 37 – 'although he had performed many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him').

#### **3.2 Miracles with beneficial consequences**

The recorded miracles of Jesus always have some beneficial consequence: a person is healed; someone's fear is stilled; wine or food is provided against the odds. We may puzzle over the mechanics of miracles (how they occur), but we can still understand the divine purpose behind them. The importance of the miracle often seems to be its consequence in the life of the believer.

#### **3.3. Miracles of divine revelation**

Rather than hearing someone's testimony about a miracle, or witnessing a miracle, we might ourselves be subjects of a miracle. We might come to hold a belief that is not fully explicable in natural terms. This is the central idea of divine revelation, which we celebrate during Epiphany: a divine initiative that can cause us to change our beliefs and actions in some way—arguably, having faith is a miracle of this kind. During Epiphany we recall many examples in the lectionary: Simeon and Anna; St Paul; the Magi; Samuel, etc. We are encouraged to draw parallels between their experiences of divine revelation, and our own.

**Next talk: Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> February, 'Slow down, it's Lent!'**

#### **References**

Davies, B. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion

Holland, RF, 'The miraculous', *American Philosophy Quarterly*, 1965 (2): 43-51

Hume, 'Of miracles', *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Ch. X (available online).

Mavrodes, G. 'Miracles', in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (OUP, 2005),

