



The Guild of St Raphael

Christ's Ministry of Healing

‘Signs and wonders’

*Sermon by the Revd Beatrice Brandon
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for the Guild's Festival Eucharist*

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Lord, may the meditations of my heart
and the words that I speak
be acceptable in your sight
and set our hearts on fire with love - for you. Amen.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (Jn 3.16).

In the gospel according to John eternal life is emphasized as the present reality and the present possession of the Christian, for the Christian believer has already begun to experience the blessings of the futurenow, *before* their fullest expression.

Eternity is not something which begins after we die, eternity is going on all of the time: we are in it now. As George Bernard Shaw wished to have quoted on his tombstone: ‘I knew if I stayed around long enough, something like this would happen’.

Trying to keep our lifetime's experience in healthy perspective is one of the enduring challenges of being human. When we are children, anyone over the age of 16 seems ancient. When we are ancient, anyone under the age of 80 seems young. But in the context of eternity, what in fact are we? A mere blink in the passage of time?

Some years ago I discovered a brilliant collection of deep space photographs taken by NASA through the Hubble telescope. The commentary by a leading astrophysicist explained that every tiny cell in our bodies is made from minute particles of matter which originated as star dust: the dust of stars which have been brought into being, which have lived, flared up towards the end of their physical life and eventually died. Then those tiny particles which remained, drifted in the direction of this planet in cosmic clouds.

I suppose this means that Richard Dawkins would agree with us on at least one point: the point that dust we are, and unto dust we shall return.



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In the meantime, if anyone asks you for your age you don't need to be specific: you can just tell them that in terms of your particles, you are a super star and you are as old as time itself.

Somehow, through the mysterious ways of God's creation, these tiny particles of ancient stars have become part of you and me. The great English poet William Wordsworth must have glimpsed something of this mystery when he described our birth – as but a sleep and a forgetting...not in entire forgetfulness, and not in utter nakedness ...but trailing clouds of glory... do we come...

If this sounds like an 'out of this world' vision emanating from an overactive artistic imagination... remember God's words to the prophet Jeremiah? "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.". God revealed to Jeremiah that, even before his conception, he was part of God's plan. Those words of knowledge from God were inexplicable, unfathomable... ..miraculous!

Have you ever wondered what plans God has for you? Have you ever wondered about his miraculous activity within the contexts of your own life?

According to St Augustine miracles happen .not in contradiction to nature, but in contradiction to what we *know* of nature. God does not work against his own creation or contradict himself. A miracle is an event or phenomena which *appears* to transcend natural laws, so far as we know about them, but which actually reveals God to the eye of faith at the same time. Miracles show that reality is not statically fixed and irreformable: it is open to the transforming power of God and of faith in him.

But many people are unable or unwilling to recognize the miraculous transforming power of God in their own lives. Once, Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed: nor will they say, 'Look, here it is! Or 'There it is' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.' . By that, Jesus meant here it is, it's embodied in me! As the visible sign of God's presence in this world, Jesus was, is - and always will be the primal and greatest sacrament.

Looking back on Jesus' incarnate ministry, John recorded that 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of the people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'



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If we align our view with John's perspective of Jesus, we are better positioned and enabled to recognize that, through God's gracious initiative, there are profound miracles going on around us and within us – all of the time.

Our coming into being as part of God's plan and to be known by him before even our conception is miraculous. God's gift to us of a human life time as preparation for everlasting life in his kingdom is miraculous. The opportunity to be cleansed of sin through the sacrament of Holy Baptism and welcomed into the family of God is miraculous.

Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to grow spiritually and be transformed in the likeness of Jesus Christ, which is only possible through God's grace, surely it is a miracle for which all of us pray and hope!

But there is more. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament use the word sign to denote a miracle that points to a deeper revelation: a sign of God's kingdom breaking through into this world. Miracles were perceived as special signs of God as creator and sustainer of all creation, his saving presence and his intentions.

Jesus' miracles involved exorcism of destructive spiritual forces and brought about changes in the very nature of physical matter demonstrating his Lordship over all creation. His miracles of resuscitation even overruled death! However, the most frequently mentioned miracles involved Jesus healing people.

Scholars believe that as much as 35% of Jesus' ministry was given to healing and working miracles. These miracles involved a wide range of people and physical, mental, spiritual and relational disorders within the local context. The reason for this is important: Jesus knew that our desire and our search for healing and wholeness transcend all human boundaries: it what all we want for ourselves and for those we love.

The news of his healing miracles in particular, drew vast crowds to Jesus: those vast crowds stayed on, to listen to his teaching about the kingdom of God. The ways in which the miracles are recorded in the synoptic gospels point us to this conclusion. Matthew, for example, organizes the healing miracles into four themes: the authority of Jesus, the role of faith in God, discipleship and salvation. John refers to the miracles as >signs= used by Jesus to proclaim the coming of God=s kingdom, to show God=s love, compassion and power to save his people.

By linking doctrinal concepts through practical illustrations, the miracles were a profoundly effective teaching resource about Jesus' mission in God's world to bring healing and reconciliation in the context of eternity. At a more mundane level, his miracles can also be understood against the background of the basic human need to hope, for that which is not seen, for something totally new, for a reconciled and healed world... ... for the kingdom of God.



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Both prior to his death upon the Cross and following his resurrection, Jesus gave to his disciples the great Commission, including to preach and teach about the kingdom of God and heal the sick.

Seven weeks after his crucifixion, at Pentecost, through the clothing of the Holy Spirit, many spiritual gifts were given to the newly emerging Church, reflecting aspects of Jesus' ministry, including gifts of wisdom, faith, and of healing.

The most beautiful, solemn and majestic gifts that Jesus has bestowed upon the Church are his sacraments, endued with unprecedented and incomparable power, to transform lives, save our souls and enable us to enter into God's family. These holy sacraments touch and transform the most vulnerable and precious areas of human life. Above all, his miracles and the sacraments make manifest the loving compassion of God, our Father and direct our focus towards his meaning for our lives.

Even more, Jesus has proclaimed that the sacraments are essential to our eternal health and wellbeing. 'unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God' and so Jesus instituted the sacrament of holy baptism.

Jesus also taught that 'unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you' and instituted the sacrament of the holy Eucharist.

As St Thomas Aquinas once said, in all the other sacraments, the power of Christ is present: in the Eucharist, Christ himself is present. In fact, the Eucharist is the highest expression of reconciliation and healing, which is why it is also sometimes known as the medicine of immortality. When God heals a body, that is temporal and temporary. However, when God saves a soul, that has eternal consequences.

When God ministers to us through his holy sacraments, he offers us the opportunity to see this life and eternity: all of all reality, in clearer focus. God's gifts of salvation, reconciliation and healing - and their expression through sacramental ministry are woven into the rich tapestry of the Church till the end of time. They are means by which God allows us - mere human beings, to approach and to experience him, through physical substances and visible signs. Sacraments are both supernatural and natural: through them, God accomplishes supernaturally, miraculously within our lives what the sacraments outwardly indicate.

Today, in this magnificent Llandaff Cathedral with thanks to the Dean, the Chapter and staff for their kind hospitality, we are celebrating and giving thanks to God for the Guild of St Raphael. The Guild has had, for many years a special place in the wider healing ministry scene. It is most



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distinctive amongst all of the independent healing ministry organizations because of its profoundly sacramental approach to ministry.

Of all these organizations, the Guild of St Raphael has the potential for a radiant future, through helping people to perceive God's healing and reconciling action in his world through sacramental ministry. No other independent healing ministry organization is fulfilling this role, so far as I am aware.

Nevertheless, we have a great challenge before us to raise awareness of the nature of and the divine dynamics within sacramental ministry. Whether they are perceived as simply signs and forms of witness, or transforming encounters with the living God, sacraments, like miracles, need to be recognised with the eyes of faith. Even Jesus encountered this challenge! He said 'unless you people see signs and wonders you will never believe'.

And the greatest group of miracles still tends to be overlooked as such: the Miracle of Miracles. The Messiah, once crucified, was exalted above the universe. Apart from that miracle, said the apostles, there is no gospel, no salvation, and no church.

So it is timely, as we look forward to Advent and Christmas to be reminded that the greatest miracles ever known in God's world are those which God embodied within Jesus: his incarnation, his transfiguration, his passion and death - his resurrection and his ascension.

As the visible sign of God's presence in this world, Jesus was, is... ..and always will be the primal and greatest sacrament. When Jesus was resurrected that first Easter Day, it was not to return to his previous life, it was the beginning of the new life, the 'new earth', finally reunited with God's heaven (Pope Benedict: VIS 20110411 470)).

Seen from this perspective, Jesus' entire ministry of healing and of reconciliation - as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be - the greatest miracle in the cosmos.

And now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or conceive, by the power which is at work among us, to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus throughout all ages. Amen.

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