

ACHRIST'S GREATEST MIRACLE@

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This evening I want to tell you the story of a miracle. A miracle so stupendous in its scope and so foundational in its effects, I have put it down as the greatest miracle ever wrought by the greatest miracle worker ever known.

In the life of Jesus, there were many amazing events which could merit our attention. There were many miracles which could vie for the top of the tower of importance. We could march them before us in review. We could bid them stop and stand before our bar of judgement. And each one, with equal confidence and right of appeal, could present a mass of evidence to support its claim to fame. Let me show you what I mean.

WATER INTO WINE

The first miracle which our Lord performed on earth was the turning of water into wine. At first glance, this homely service seems of little significance, but in the second chapter of his gospel, John gives us the key to its importance. He writes, **A**This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory@ (John 2:11a). In other words, while this deed is important in itself, it owes its chief importance to what it can teach us about our Lord. In a very profound sense, it holds a mirror up to the face of Jesus and reveals something of His mission among men and something of His method of achieving that mission.

Here in beautiful simplicity we have symbolized the whole work which the Son of Man came to do. The enriching of the common place. The exalting of the lowly. And, as someone has said, **A**The making of saints out of sinners. Angels out of men. And, in the end, heaven out of earth. A new paradise of God out of the old wilderness of the world.@

Here, too, is a clue to how He will accomplish these marvelous transformations.

How did He change this water into wine? Certainly He could have done it without any assistance. But instead, He chose to do it through the aid of human hands. The servants were invited to help Him. In fact, as Dr. Clovis Chappel points out, they had to do all they could do before this miracle was possible. And it is ever so.

When the 5000 were hungry and began to mill about in search of food, Jesus turned to aid to a nameless boy who had five little loaves and two tiny fish tucked away in his pocket.

Before the paralytic could leap from his bed healed in body and soul, four determined friends, who refused to be deterred by any difficulty, had to lower him into the presence of Jesus.

Human hands had to roll away the stone which locked Lazarus in the tomb before Jesus could free him from the bonds of death. Human hands had to cut away the grave clothes which bound him before he could return again to the loving arms of Mary and Martha.

The truth of the matter is that all of the transforming work of God waits for the cooperation of people.

It was true in the days of the early church. To turn the tide of history away from the cruelty of oppression, to begin the building of His Kingdom in the lives of men, God had to have the help of a thunderbolt named John and a man called Peter.

It was true in the dark ages. When the night of spiritual darkness had settled over Europe and there was an urgent need for even one faint glimmer of light, God had to have the assistance of a man called Luther.

It is true today. In our own time. In our own town. We have seen how God works through people to perform His miracles of transformation. And the message which comes to us this

morning from the marriage feast of Cana is that to do His work in our generation, God needs a person called you.

For God's omnipotence is linked to our own willingness. You and I can thwart the greatness of God by our refusal to let Him use our lives. But, by the same token, we can be partners with Him, channels of divine grace, if we link our willingness to His Almightyness.

Thus, we set before us this first great miracle of Christ. No other miracle has so much of prophecy in it. And therefore, no other miracle could have inaugurated so fittingly the whole future work of our Lord. That of Achanging the water of earth into the wine of heaven.@ And because of its prophetic message, there are those who would say this is Christ's greatest miracle.

BARTIMAEUS

In the 10th chapter of Mark, we are introduced to a second supernatural act of Jesus which stirs the imagination and cries out for our perusal. It is the story of the healing of Bartimaeus.

Bartimaeus was a beggar but, more than that, he was blind. Following his healing, Mark describes him Aas following Jesus in the way@(Mark 10:52).

One can almost see Bartimaeus skipping nimbly through the streets of Jericho. Dancing with joy that now he can see what once he could only hear and feel and taste and smell.

Only a few moments before, he had been sitting by the roadside begging and what a pathetic character he was! Poor, blind, miserable mendicant. Skin burned black from sitting for 10,000 days in the boiling sun. Sightless eyes sunk deep in watery sockets, never having known the glory of a sunrise or the blazing miracle of a sunset. Hair disheveled and matted gray. And his cloak, yes, his cloak seemed to complete the picture. Filthy. Vermin ridden. Reeking from the combined odor of dirt and disease.

This was blind Bartimaeus. A beggar. Or, as someone has described him, AA mere ragged pocket which calamity had turned upside down and emptied of everything of worth.@

And then the miracle happened! Somewhere out in the darkness, Bartimaeus heard the roar of a crowd. His ears told him something big was taking place. Maybe it was the returning army of the Roman rulers or, better still, a caravan of wealthy travelers from Egypt. Travelers who would give him alms to alleviate his suffering.

The roar got louder as the crowd drew nearer. Bartimaeus staggered to his feet and, groping through the blackness he had known since birth, he grabbed the arm of a passerby. AWho is it, friend?@ The stranger wrenched loose from the blind man's grasp, AIt is Jesus, beggar, but He has no time for the likes of you.@ And rushing on, he joined the crowd which milled about the Man of Galilee.

Jesus! The name started Bartimaeus' heart to pounding. He had heard of Jesus, the Miracle Man, and now this Jesus was passing by. Maybe, just maybe, He would work a miracle for him. A prayer rushed from his lips, AJesus, Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me.@

Have you ever wondered how God could hear the simple prayer of a sincere soul amid all the clutter and clatter of the crowd of people who have no real concern, but just glibly rattle off their little memorized, meaningless prayers? Well, He does it the same way Jesus did it that day.

Jesus knew that, to the crowd, He was just a passing fancy. He knew that theirs was only the idle interest of a thrill-seeker, momentarily attracted by a new fascination. But through the din and babble of the mob, His penetrating ears heard the prayer of an earnest heart and He stopped.

The crowd parted and into the center of the circle came poor, blind, miserable Bartimaeus.

AWhat would thou that I should do unto thee?@, asked Jesus. ALord,@came the answer, Athat my

eyes might be opened.@"

And then, He who at the first creation had said, "Let there be light" and there was light, in Bartimaeus displayed that same, almighty power. In an instant the day dawned and the shadows fell away. Bartimaeus was made to see.

What a glorious moment that must have been. The receiving of sight into blinded eyes. Yes, there are those who would say that this was Christ's greatest miracle.

THE OTHERS

And so we might go on and describe any one of the forty odd miracles which Christ performed while on earth. The feeding of the 5000. The healing of the lepers. The stilling of the mighty tempest. The curing of the deaf and dumb man. And, as we would finish with each, someone would say, "That was Christ's greatest miracle."

But it was not one of these. Nor was it -- Walking on the water. Raising the widow's son. Healing the demoniac. Curing the withered hand. It was not even the resurrection! You must remember it was God, the Father, who raised Christ, the Son. Jesus was dead. He was powerless to raise Himself. God rolled away the stone! God whispered into the ears of Jesus as He lay there, saying, "Son, arise, the victory is complete."

Yes, God wrought that miracle. God did the work. This was God's stamp of approval upon Christ's death upon the cross. If it had not been sufficient, if Jesus' blood had not atoned for our sins, God would simply have left Him lying in the tomb to crumble into dust. And today, Jesus would be just another martyr. Another stupendous, colossal fool, who thought He could deceive Almighty God.

But the cross was sufficient. It was enough. And, on the third day God pushed aside the clouds

and gently breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of the crucified Christ. And, in so doing, He wrote His Aeternal Amen@ to the work of Jesus on the cross. Yes, the resurrection was a miracle of God, the Father.

THE CROSS

Well then, what was His greatest miracle? I've already given you a clue. It happened near the very end of His earthly ministry. I am sure you know the story. How, after expending His energies in service to others He was betrayed and led away to face judgement before Pilate.

I wonder if you could go back with me across the centuries and stand amid the crowd as they watched Jesus on trial for His life. Pilate could find no fault in Him and we hear him say, AWhat would you have me do with Jesus who is called the Christ?@ And we stand in shocked amazement as the crowd, raised to a height of frenzy by the religious rabble, shout ACrucify Him, crucify Him. Give us Barabbas, the criminal, but crucify Jesus, The Christ.@

Pilate, too, is shocked. He thought that perhaps, if the people could see Jesus in a state of physical suffering, their lust for blood would be satisfied. And so, he commanded the soldiers to beat Him.

Out into the common court they led the Prince of Peace. Coarse hands removed His garments and leather tongs tipped with bits of flint were laid across His back again and again until His flesh literally hung in shreds. Then, placing a royal robe on His shoulders, they put a reed in His hand and pressed a crown of thorns upon His regal brow and lifted Him up and mocked Him saying, AHail, Jesus, King of the Jews!@

But with all of that, the blood lust of the people would be satisfied with nothing short of Calvary. So, once again, they stripped Him of His garments and, taking a cruel wooden cross which had been constructed for Barabbas, the criminal, but was now for Jesus, The Christ, they laid it upon

His torn and bleeding shoulders. And then began the most infamous death march in history. Far more terrifying than Bataan, or Corregidor, or any experience of mankind before or since. Along the dusty roads of old Jerusalem it came. And there, the people spat upon Him, stoned Him and scorned Him with all manner of vile and evil names.

As the procession made its way through the gates of the city and started up the hill called Golgotha, Jesus, weakened by the loss of blood and the intensity of the physical suffering inflicted by the hands of men, stumbled and fell to the road. As He lay there, pinned by the weight of the cross, the dirt of the road mingled with the blood and sweat to form mud cakes upon His face and Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, was ugly to look upon.

The soldiers summoned Simon, the Cyrene, to bear the cross on up to the summit of the hill called Calvary. And then, stretching His perfect body upon it, they placed the nails in His hands and feet and the hammer rose and began to fall, beating out the hate, hate, hate of men for God. When they had tied Him there so the weight of His body would not pull Him free, they lifted up the cross. For a moment, it teetered back and forth in the afternoon sun and then, with a horrible thud, they plunged it into the hole.

Gone were all the external influences which had fired the imagination of men and caused them to leave all and follow Him. Gone were all the romantic notions of the disciples that He would become King of Israel. Surely, the victory of His enemies was complete. Surely He could do no miracle there, hanging on a cross.

But then it was, as He hung there, literally between earth and sky, after His enemies had done their worst. After the final cord of man's symphony of hate had been played and the concert was seemingly over. Then it was that Christ performed His greatest miracle when, with a triumphant shout He cried, It is finished and gave up the ghost and died.

Hear that and bow your head and wonder. For this is your redeemer. This is He who died from sin to set you free. Your sins, your hate, your lusts were part of those that nailed Him to the tree. And yet, when men had done their utmost, Christ had His greatest hour of victory.

Yes, the miracle of Calvary was indeed Christ's greatest miracle. For while, in the changing of the water into wine there was a promise of that which was to come, here that promise is fulfilled.

While, in the healing of Bartimaeus, blinded eyes were opened and the beauty of this world was brought into view, through the miracle of Calvary Christ opened the eyes of the spiritually blind that they might behold the matchless glories of God's eternal paradise.

While, on other occasions when Christ brought the dead to life, they could only look forward to experiencing the bitterness of death again. But, through the miracle of Calvary, Christ gave to all who receive it, a life which will know no death in a world which will know no end.

The miracle of Calvary! Giving (as someone has said) to all who receive it,

A love that can never be fathomed,
A peace that can never be understood,
A joy that can never be diminished,
A hope that can never be destroyed,
A glory that will never be clouded,
A light that will never be darkened,
A beauty that will never be marred,
And a life that will never die.@(Anon.)

The miracle of Calvary! God grant it shall be performed in your heart this evening.