

Easter 4 'We should not live by miracles alone'  
(Take home message from today's gospel-Jn 10 v 22-30)

It is easy to slip past the opening to that gospel without noting its significance. John knew what he was doing when he set his story about Jesus in the context of a Jewish festival and in particular-the Feast of Dedication (or Lights) - Hannukah. Faithful Jews loved to party: their year was a succession of festivals. After celebrating New Year there was:

A two-day celebration Purim (Feb/Mar)

Pesach- an 8-day celebration (Mar/April)

Yom Kippur- The day of Atonement (early Sept)

Sukkoth- Feast of Tabernacles or Shelters, another 8 day do (later Sept)

Simchat Torah (Oct)

Most celebrated miraculous acts by God, described in the OT, specifically for the Jewish nation and most believing Jews gladly partied on every occasion. For those who had long left their homeland and to whom John's gospel was directed, festival celebrations brought fond memories flooding back.

It was now winter and time for Hannukah, the last festival of a crowded year, which recalled God's most recent apparent miraculous intervention on behalf of his people. As recorded in the book of Maccabees, the rebuilt '2<sup>nd</sup>' temple had been trashed by the invading armies of a pagan king and needed to be rededicated: for this they needed light to see what they were doing and they had lamps but only a few drops of oil. Undaunted their leader, Judas Maccabees lit a lamp, which miraculously stayed alight for eight days. Cue another 8-day celebration!

So those Jews in Jn 10 had come to Jesus wanting similar festival-worthy signs before they could believe he was any kind of saviour or agent from God, worth his salt: oil that burnt and gave light without being consumed, like Moses' burning bush. In a nutshell they were asking the question on many lips in the Jewish diaspora: "What has Jesus ever done for us?"

Jesus tells them he is not that kind of saviour: the signs were plain to see in the entirety of his 'works': he could have cherry-picked the highlights, 'miracles' in anyone's book, but this would have given completely the wrong impression. The evidence lay in very breath and step He took in a life dedicated to others. His image of a shepherd and his flock was appropriate because shepherds did not just care for

their sheep on high days and holidays: their's was a 24/7 relationship. People who could not see this was a new way of living and that God was able to achieve similar things through all who followed that way, were not of the same flock, not in the same fold and not on the same page of the divine script. What was needed was not the recall of rededicated bricks and mortar, albeit a precious, rebuilt temple, but a rededication and rebuilding of present lives.

[We sung "Like a mighty river flowing----is the peace of God", at this point to capture Jesus' drift]

The context of that episode from John 10 is highly relevant to our position today because we Christians, like Jews, have been reared on a diet of miracles and festivals from the earliest times. For example, we could (and some might say should!) have read as an 'Epistle' a pseudo-historic 'miracle' story from Acts 9 (v32-43) about Peter raising a woman called Tabitha from life to death, the sort of miracle that Luke had also attributed to Jesus: take a close look at that passage at home by all means but consider this. Acts is part II of a Gospel whose message was that Jesus, on behalf of God, welcomed Gentiles as much as Jews. However, like John's gospel, it also targeted disparate Jews. Miracle stories fell on well-tuned ears and receptive hearts and anecdotal lilies may have been guilded to ensure the message took root.

I am asking myself two questions this morning: has the liturgist and a compliant church deliberately taken a leaf out of Luke's book to continue feeding us an overrich diet a diet of miracles to go with our Easter festival? By doing so, has the impact of John's gospel been weakened? I suggest that the answer to both questions is 'yes' and, as a result, many churches- like ours- are in danger of drying up, rather than flowing like tributaries of a mighty river.

I spoke recently about a pilgrimage that members of our congregation made to the Holy Land in the 80's. The itinerary took us to many sites where Jesus is said to have performed miracles in the Gospels and was spiritually uplifting. However, every now and then, we would lapse into tourist/voyeuristic mode and buy our souvenirs. Tilly and I purchased a gold-plated Hannukah candle, for example. In the evenings we took turns to lead a meditation. I recall confessing, when my turn came round, that we had been more inclined to open purses than hearts! I also quoted from a recent book by Elias Chacour, 'Blood Brothers', in which Elias recalled an occasion in 1947 when, as a boy, he had climbed a tree at Ibilin, the Palestinian village where he had

been born, and watched Israelis taking over land that his family had farmed for years.

In a departure from convention, our party had made an impromptu visit to meet the author, by then a Melkite Catholic priest, at Ibilin, where he had established a multi-faith school with 80 students in 1982. It has grown out of all recognition and now has > 4000 students, from kindergarten to university level and is known as the Mar Elias Educational Institutions (MEEI). When a suicide bomber wreaked havoc in the port city of Haifa, wounding many innocent civilians, Muslim, Jewish, Druze and Christian students stepped forward to donate blood, without thought of who might benefit. Here, we have not one but a cluster of 'works' that are miracles by any other name. God's peace flowing like a mighty river, enabled by Elias, acting as shepherd of a flock: but a flock with a difference. Students would graduate, not as sheep but as young shepherds. I found our visit to Ibilin to be as transformational and uplifting as any visit to a biblical site.

Over halfway through our Easter celebrations, let us not forget that we are not merely celebrating a past miracle but the possibility that what Jesus achieved in his short life is achievable through us in our lives. Easter is current, topical, life-transforming today and the sooner we and the church wake up to that fact, the stronger the river of peace will flow!

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