

Transforming Miracles Sermon Series (The Book of Signs)

Introduction

The seven signs in the Gospel of John are pivotal moments which reveal to us more and more of who Jesus is, through a whole variety of miraculous actions. They might also be described as 'clues' of 'signposts' leading us to the treasure of all that God has come to do and accomplish, in the end revealing his full glory and purposes. These signs are more than just metaphors or fantastic stories. They are real tangible events through which Jesus manifests himself, as the famous motto which is an overarching theological theme of John, 'the word became flesh'. Tom Wright describes them as 'moments when heaven is opened when the transforming power of God bursts into the world'. We are invited not just to hear about how great Jesus is, but to be drawn into those scenes when he performed miracles that could only be done by God. I hope that as we come to re-visit these incredible encounters and actions of Jesus revealing his divinity in humanity, our faith might be deepened and transformed.

Below are the passages with some thoughts to each. It would be good to be clear in the first sermon and continue to remind people that these seven scriptures constitute a key development in John's Gospel rather than them being seen as randomly compiled passages. As always there is much more than can be unpacked with each of these passages, so do not feel confined to what I have written, but I hope they might be a helpful starting point.

The Best is Yet to Come (John 2:1-11)

The first of these signs starts at a wedding in Cana, which is perhaps most famously known for Jesus' supernatural power in turning water into wine. However, there are various levels of meaning to this passage which are worth considering. The setting of the wedding itself alludes to the imagery of the great heavenly marriage we find in Revelation between Christ and his Church and the eternal banquet that it will be. The use of the water-jars is significant as they are used for the purification rites in the Old-testament tradition. The way in which Jesus uses them to perform this miracle brings a whole new meaning and a new way for purification for the whole world. And of course, the miracle of turning water into wine, not only shows divine power and the divine nature of Christ, but it also reflects the transformative effect that God has on people, which is not only present in the Gospels but real for us in our lives too. I think perhaps one of my favourite lines comes in verse 10 'everyone brings out the choice wine first, but you have saved the best until now'. The variety of the imagery in this passage is a wonderful reminder that in Christ, the best is always yet to come.

Truth in God's Word (John 4:46-54)

This scene is the first of three healings that Jesus performs as part of the seven signs. Like the other signs, something extra-ordinary happens. The son of an official who is at the point of death is healed twenty-four hours after he has pleaded with Jesus for him to be healed. But what is especially important here is what Jesus says. Unlike other healings where Jesus

does something physical as part of the healing process (using mud and spit for example) here he simply says 'Go, your son will be healed'. The response of the official is key as John writes that the official 'took Jesus at his word'. The miracles that Jesus performs really do show the power of God, but we ought not to misunderstand the 'word' of the 'word made flesh' as being in any way separate from the tangible acts of Jesus. Whilst God can surprise us in all sorts of ways, we must believe and trust in Jesus' word, and show that in how we live our lives. Like we have seen in this passage, Jesus will always act according to his word.

The Real Deal (John 5:1-15)

This next episode of healing the paralytic at Bethesda holds some similarities to that of the healing of the official's son. Jesus' words carry great weight, and authority, as he says to the man in verse 8 'Get up! Pick up your mat and walk', to which the man gets up and is able to walk immediately. But more than that it shows Jesus to be if you like, the 'real deal'. The healing pool offered no guarantee of healing. This crippled man had been spending the best part of 38 years here hoping to be healed. When Jesus comes along, he instantly fulfils all that the man had hoped for, for so long. This doesn't necessarily answer questions as to why some Christians are not healed physically, but it does show us that whatever we search for in life, our deepest desires and needs are only met in Jesus. If we are willing to believe in who Jesus is and what he says, following his commands as this man does, then a completely new lease of life is open to us. What's more, Jesus does not distinguish between people groups. The pool is not only a Jewish healing pool but also used by the pagans, in a diverse society, as ours is today. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news to all who believe and listen to him.

Unexpected Provision (John 6:5- 14)

By now, more and more people are becoming intrigued by what Jesus is doing, and so his following is growing significantly. It's no coincidence that this miracle falls at the time of the Passover, which makes the connection back to the exodus story, the liberation of God's people from slavery to freedom and the 'bread of heaven' in the wilderness. The scene begins with Philip and Andrew talking about the lack of food for the large crowd (the only Gospel account which records their dialogue). They raise the issue of such small quantities of fish and bread with Jesus, which is an important reminder that we should always take our problems and the little we have to Jesus first. With this, Jesus surprises everyone in such a creative way providing in abundance, and not wanting to waste anything. As a result, the crowds are starting to come to grips with Jesus as the Messiah, the one who will lead God's people. But they still haven't worked out that his kingship will look much different to what might have been expected. That is, he will first suffer in order to bring about and provide salvation and life in all its fullness.

Safety in the Chaos (John 6:16-24)

Like the feeding of the five thousand, we can also make a connection to the exodus and the red sea. In the Bible, water is often depicted as chaotic, powerful and scary, but for those who are chosen, it is the way to safe passage. We see this tangibly in baptism, as water is both symbolic of death, but also the way to new life in Christ. The disciples who were

fisherman in this passage naturally would have been used to the sea, but they would have also become very fearful and shake up when it became rough. In the same way life for us can get like that. We may be used to many things and even have a lot of life experience but sometimes we're caught out in troubling and scary situations and lose control. But what we learn from this passage, is that Jesus has the ability and desire to step out and come to us. This may be disturbing at first, but ultimately Jesus wants to comfort us and lead us to safe shores.

Light in the Darkness John 9:1-7

Jesus' third healing opens up a significant theological dilemma, which must be addressed. It comes out of the disciple's question about whether the blind man was born blind because of sin he committed or a directly inherited sin. It's not so distant from current world views, for example in some Hindu traditions the former life affects the current. The notion of cause and effect in Karma also plays a part in this. However, the Christian understanding is not that our suffering or disability is directly related to something we or our parents did. Of course, mistakes we make have consequences, but the chaos, the darkness of the world and its problems run deeper and are more complex than the question the disciples pose. What Jesus does here is as he says in verse 3 is to use the suffering to show the outworking of God's Glory. Just as in Genesis God brought light into the darkness in creation, Jesus is here, the light of the world. Jesus uses mud and spit, the very essence of the creation of the earth and humanity in Adam. And now, through this miracle, Jesus shows his light and his glory and allows others to enter into it, able to see a new reality, looking towards a new creation.

Goodness and Hope (John 11:1-45)

This final sign of John's seven is a powerful and climactic one to conclude the series. Up until now a growing number of Jesus' followers have been amazed by Jesus' miracles of transformation, healing and provision. This scene, however, combines intimacy, grief and power all together. Mary and Martha are deeply saddened at the death of Lazarus and Jesus enters into their spirit, weeping as they do. But Jesus' response is not to put on a kind of show for lots of people to be convinced that he's the son of God. Nor does Jesus just talk about a future resurrection. He reveals himself as the embodied resurrection come into the midst of the world. 'If only you'd come sooner' Martha says to Jesus. But once again, Jesus surprises beyond belief. He raises Lazarus from death to life. He shows power, authority and ultimate control and sovereignty over everything, more so perhaps than the previous six signs. He manifests true hope. When things go drastically wrong and when we think 'if only we'd done this, or if only this had happened', we can go to Jesus and allow him to turn even the worst situations into good. Jesus shows us he is the Messiah, he has come to bring new life, hope, and he will always be there with us and for us, in whatever we go through.

