

2nd Sunday after Trinity, 9 June 2013

1 Kings 17.8-end, Luke 7.11-17

'For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles'.

1 Corinthians 1.22-23

Do I have credibility? You will all have your own opinions about that and you may come up with different answers depending on what you're basing your judgement. If you think a credible vicar is one whose sermons stimulate or inspire then I'll give you 13 minutes to make your mind up. If you think what gives a vicar credibility is their quality of pastoral care, their commitment to a disciplined life of prayer and reflection, their doing in their own lives what they proclaim with their lips, their success or otherwise in leading a growing Christian community or their commitment to engaging with the local community beyond the walls and membership lists of the church – well, based on one or more of those things you may have come to a judgement about your current incumbent. While some of you may have put prayerfulness somewhere high up in your criteria I doubt whether any of you would have put the working of miracles on your list. I had my annual ministry review this week with a person appointed by the bishop. Each year I have the opportunity of reviewing the year past and setting goals for the coming year. In the list of things I may have achieved, or helped to achieve, making blind people see or healing the lame or multiplying loaves and fishes or raising the dead doesn't usually appear. My credibility in the eyes of the church authorities or in your eyes - or those of many of our parishioners – does not depend on me being able to work miracles, or at least not that sort of miracle.

Credibility is important – whether you're a doctor or an actor or a politician or a priest it's important that you are credible, and that means that you are believable: credo is the Latin 'I believe'. Now as a Christian priest ultimately I don't want you to believe in me as much as to believe in God and, to get there, to believe in Jesus. The New Testament stands or falls on the question of credibility. Faith in Christ is at the heart of the gospel; it is key to everything that St Paul and the other authors of the New Testament write about. It is about believing. The NT is written in Greek because Greek was the wider cultural language of the Mediterranean – not Latin. The Romans were greater fighters and great builders of roads, drains and social infrastructure but one of the things the Romans didn't do for us is provide a philosophical and intellectual culture where learning could thrive – it was the Greeks that did that for us and is their lasting legacy. The Greeks were the ideas people, they sought Sophia, wisdom – that is, for any philosophy or religion to be credible it had to pass the wisdom test. But for the Jews it was different. They looked for signs – that is, miraculous events that gave authority and credibility to the one who performed them. And they measured the significance of any would be prophet or preacher by the two giants of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah who represented in their persons the two key strands of their Bible, which they, funnily enough didn't call the OT (we Christians called it that) but the Law and the Prophets. Moses the Lawgiver established his credibility through signs, notably the parting of the Red Sea and the feeding of the children of Israel in the wilderness by the daily provision of quails and manna, their daily bread from Heaven. Elijah in our first reading similarly performs a feeding miracle for the widow of Zarephath and then goes on to raise her dead son to life.

The crowds that witnessed the deeds of Jesus were constantly measuring him up against the great figures of their history and he made such an impression on them that they even compared him to Moses and Elijah. Greeks sought wisdom but Jews demanded signs. What could Jesus do for him to measure up to the giants of the past. Perhaps you can see why the feeding miracles are so prominent in the gospels: the feeding of the 5000 occurs not only in Matthew, Mark and Luke, but also in John who is sparing in his reporting of miracles but who devotes over 50 verses to that story and the following discourse concerning Jesus as the Bread of life, comparing him with the manna of the OT story.

The gospel-writers are keen for us to see a Jesus who is greater than Moses and Elijah – a staggering claim. But if Jesus was to have credibility amongst his own people he had to be able to emulate the deeds of those spiritual giants.

That is the background to today's gospel reading as Jesus enters the small town of Nain with a large crowd and meets a large crowd coming in the other direction. It is a funeral procession, heading out to the family grave where the widow's son would be laid amidst great sorrow and lament. As often with Jesus we see his humanity and tenderness [v13]. We also see his touch [v14]. It's interesting isn't it? We know that Jesus touched the sick – not least the untouchables, the lepers, as if to say that in him God reaches out to all of humanity in its brokenness and alienation, across the taboos of race, religion and ritual purity. To touch the bier was making him unclean but it's more important for Jesus to cross those taboo boundaries than it is for him to remain clean. He says, 'Young man, I say to you, rise' – he not only touches but he also addresses a dead body, and the dead man rises and is restored to his grieving mother. Not surprisingly, fear seizes the crowds, but also recognition – [v16]. Through this sign Jesus has enhanced his credibility with his own people.

Our problem today is that we are more with the Greeks – we are Gentiles after all – we seek wisdom not signs. And in our post-Enlightenment, post-scientific revolution world we have learnt to be sceptical of claims to miracles. We don't expect our religious leaders to raise the dead and for some of us gospel stories such as these don't lead us to faith. Quite the opposite – they leave many of us sceptical. I had a wonderful pillar of the church when I was vicar in Waterbeach who was wonderfully supportive but could also be thoroughly forthright. She could cope, she said, with the resurrection of Jesus - he was the Son of God after all, but multiplication of loaves, defying gravity on water, corpses leaping to their feet – well, she couldn't cope with that.

And I guess there will be those here – perhaps quite a number of you – who feel the same. Others of you won't have a problem – if the Good Book says that's what happened then it's good enough for you. At heart I am actually a simple soul and will more often than not side with you. But for those who struggle at a credibility level with such miracles I'd encourage you to think of it in this way – because the purpose of these stories is not to damage credibility but to enhance it. The conclusion of the story says that 'This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.' Whatever happened, the rumour was abroad that this Galilean preacher did the sort of things that Moses and Elijah did of old – and, put together with his profound and revolutionary teaching, this led many of his fellow countrymen to toy with the possibility that one who was greater than Elijah or even Moses was with them. That's what these stories are about, what these signs, however we understand them, are pointing to. And if you are a bit sceptical about signs and wonders then you can take a bit of comfort from the fact that St Paul shared your anxiety about

looking to such things to validate the truth of our faith. 'Jews demand signs', he wrote, 'and Greeks wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.' At the heart of it is the miracle of love that will not turn away from touching and entering into the depths of human sorrow and suffering.