

29. April 2023

Signs and miracles in the service of evangelisation

Acts 9:31-42

The churches throughout Judaea, Galilee and Samaria were now left in peace, building themselves up and living in the fear of the Lord; encouraged by the Holy Spirit, they continued to grow. It happened that Peter visited one place after another and eventually came to God's holy people living down in Lydda. There he found a man called Aeneas, a paralytic who had been bedridden for eight years. Peter said to him, 'Aeneas, Jesus Christ cures you: get up and make your bed.' Aeneas got up immediately; everybody who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they were converted to the Lord. At Jaffa there was a disciple called Tabitha, or in Greek, Dorcas, who never tired of doing good or giving to those in need. But it happened that at this time she became ill and died, and they washed her and laid her out in an upper room. Lydda is not far from Jaffa, so when the disciples heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to urge him, 'Come to us without delay.' Peter went back with them immediately, and on his arrival they took him to the upper room, where all the widows stood round him in tears, showing him tunics and other clothes Dorcas had made when she was with them. Peter sent everyone out of the room and knelt down and prayed. Then he turned to the dead woman and said, 'Tabitha, stand up.' She opened her eyes, looked at Peter and sat up. Peter helped her to her feet, then he called in the members of the congregation and widows and showed them she was alive. The whole of Jaffa heard about it and many believed in the Lord.

Great signs and miracles accompanied the proclamation of the apostles, and precisely what the Lord had projected through these signs of His goodness was happening: people were embracing the faith. And it was not just one or the other who was converted, but whole communities.

This fact clearly shows us that faith is not only meant for certain circles, but for all people. That is why the Church must take great care that the faith remains a public matter, and is not relegated by the civil powers to a mere matter of private life. There has always been the attempt to repress the message of faith and to make religion a private

matter, in order to better control it and, if possible, to take away its influence on the public sphere.

In the early Church, things were different. While it was persecuted and every effort was made to curb its spread, the accounts in the Acts of the Apostles show that the opposite was true. It turns out that those who were scattered because of persecution took the gospel to other regions (cf. Acts 8:4); a persecutor like Saul of Tarsus became a herald of the Good News; the Lord worked great signs and miracles through the apostles; whole localities were converted, as we hear in today's reading.

The Lord fulfilled what He had promised the disciples: He proved His mission by signs and wonders, and made them sharers in His own power (cf. Mk 16:17-18).

Seeing these miraculous healings and even the raising of the dead, as in today's account, might raise the question: Could it be that these extraordinary events were a particular gift to the early Church, and then, when the persecutions ceased and the Church could officially spread far and wide, such miracles occurred only sporadically? Or is this decline a sign of a decline in faith and a slowing of the momentum and fervour we find in the early Church?

If we reflect on this, we should ask ourselves whether signs and miracles are less necessary nowadays, or whether God no longer shows His favour today as much as He did in former times. The latter option seems unthinkable, because it is the same God, whose Being is immutable and who performs miracles then as now.

Another question would be whether we are already so "mature" in faith that we would not need signs and miracles, for faith stands even without such wonders.

Certainly our faith should not be dependent on miraculous signs, nor should we base it primarily on such extraordinary events. Nevertheless, signs are great gifts of God and are at the service of the Lord's proclamation, as is testified to us in so many accounts. Miracles are particularly important for those who are to come to faith by seeing these signs; or, rather, they can be for them an important means of proclaiming the Lord.

This is how it happened in today's passage, which states that all the inhabitants of Lydda and Sharon were converted when they saw that the paralytic was healed.

It would be good, then, if the proclamation of the gospel were accompanied by signs and miracles also today. Therefore, we have to pray for an awakening of faith, that the Lord will grant these visible signs of His presence, so that people will accept the faith more easily.

If the cause of the diminishing of this great gift of performing signs and wonders in the name of the Lord is a weakening of faith, then there must be an awakening of this faith, so that those signs which confirm the proclamation may be manifested again.

May everything be for the glory of God, including signs and wonders, so that, as today's reading concludes, many may believe in the Lord.