

The healing of the royal official's son

May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

So...here we have the second sign from John's Gospel. Once more Jesus is in Cana in Galilee where he had turned water into wine. Last week we heard about a party, a place where community and family and friends were gathered to celebrate a wedding.

Today the story continues but it's different. This is no party. Instead we have a royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum.

This official was from the royal courts. He was no friend of Jesus. There could possibly have been some hostility, or some indifference between the two men. Jesus was the son of a carpenter.

The royal official most probably worked for King Herod.

Yet, this man swallowed his pride and approached Jesus and begged him to come and heal his son - who was close to death.

This is a story about faith. He went to Jesus asking for help. An unlikely suspect to come to Jesus but he came anyway.

And although Jesus didn't discriminate – I have to say that at first he wasn't particularly friendly either. Maybe Jesus was testing his faith or maybe he was speaking to the crowds but Jesus's words here somewhat harsh.

Jesus said: 'Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders you will never believe'.

However, I don't think that the Royal Official came wanting to see a magic trick, he didn't want to see water turn into wine. (Some of us want to see wine turn into water – but that's story for another day. Anyway -)

The man came from a place of desperation because his son was sick. He said to Jesus: Sir, come down before my child dies.

His main concern was the welfare of his child. And likewise we know that other people's suffering has a power to distress us. Feeling powerless when others are suffering puts us too in a place of need.

And it is in matters like this with a sense of urgency and desperation we realise that we are inadequate to deal with the situation. And the only thing to do is turn to God.

The man begged Jesus to help and asked him to come and heal his son. He had walked about 20 miles to get to Jesus. And Jesus sent him back another 20 miles. Jesus didn't come back with him. He simply said 'You may go, your son will live'.

I wonder – did the royal official really believe him? But he turned and went back and it took him over a day to get to his sick child. I wonder what sort of conversation he was having with God as he journeyed home.

But he did go. He was obedient and he didn't hang around to pester Jesus and make him take the journey with him to Capernaum. He took him at his word and went back, with some faith – we don't know how much. But he was a desperate man and had to put his trust in the most likely place that looked like God.

Sometimes God can seem distant, and that asking God for something may seem like a long shot. We don't have the real person Jesus to see, to touch, to talk to. Some of us may say that we walk and talk with Jesus but there is also an untangible reality to God and to faith.

When God is distant and life is not a party, when we have a heaviness of soul or weight of responsibility we too may feel the desperate need for a real sign or a wonder from God.

But perhaps what God needs from us is a little bit of trust, to take him at his word. And to think that maybe, just maybe God's promises are for us too.

Feeling desperate or threatened is a common human experience. I think that the meaning of miracles is about trying to break through the existing dangers and open our lives up to the bright light of a new world.

Marvels and wonders in religion are the opposite of superstition. Miracles in a real sense are the most cherished possessions of ordinary human life.

We believe in miracles not only through fear, and need and uncertainty but through our basic attraction to see the light of a new world, the way of a new Kingdom.

And despite every danger - we have an instinctive urge to hope, to trust that Jesus's words might be true and they might be for us because hidden - in depths of ourselves is the precious pearl of faith.

The boy who lay dying at Capernaum didn't receive a physical touch from Jesus; there was no witnessing of Jesus coming to breathe on him, the breath of divine life – like a tale from Narnia with Aslan the powerful lion coming to restore the good.

Jesus didn't want his followers to miss the point and he doesn't want us to miss the point either. Yes Jesus is God, the messiah and can do miracles, and signs and wonders but there is also a very important place for our **faith and trust** which builds up a complete picture of God's Kingdom.

The fullness of the Christian life is not just about recognising that Jesus is God it is also about our relationship with our sometimes seemingly distant God. God asks us to step out in our times of celebration and also in our times of desperation – even with our small amount of faith and trust so that we can see miracles too.

The royal official took Jesus at his word and while he was still on the way his servants met him - with the news - that the boy was living. The father realised that his son had got better, at the exact time at which Jesus had said: 'Go, your son will live' - then he and his entire household believed.

Suddenly a situation changed, a break-through came in healing, through faith and in the act of asking. Was it a long shot for the royal official to seek Jesus, to beg him and then walk back on the strength of some words from a wandering preacher and carpenter's son?

I do think there was a swallowing of pride for the royal official in this story. The man who worked for Herod was shown the way of the new kingdom based on faith in Jesus and trust in his word.

Meeting his servants on the way back he was told that a miracle had happened, that his boy was living. It is a wonderful story, a simple story that offers us the hope of a miracle too.

A need was brought before God and through faith overwhelming love was found.

Sometimes miracles in our lives won't seem spectacular – but perhaps the meaning of miracles is to find that our ordinary lives can be transformed through faith in a mysterious God.

Perhaps when we most need a miracle it may seem that God is distant, that God is hidden from us.

However, perhaps it is also the hidden pearl of faith within ourselves that we seek. Because sometimes what is closest is most difficult to grasp, what is nearest is most unclear, what is simplest is most difficult to say.

Jesus performs a miracle in this story but an important part of the story is the faith and trust of the royal official. God's kingdom is revealed not just through a miracle but also there was a plant of faith and trust in a person who was not in Jesus's merry band of tax collectors and sinners but who was from (of all places) Herod's royal court. Jesus challenged his contemporaries as he challenges us now us to think about the categories that we put people in - about who is in and who is out.

This story shows us that Jesus doesn't discriminate (he doesn't only heal people that were his friends, or those who were poor and down-trodden) Jesus was willing to heal both the powerful and the powerless to bring his transforming, unconditional and deeply compassionate love to us all. Amen.

8th August 2015 Jenny Walpole