

Greater Than All Miracles

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, October 10th, 2010

We are all probably familiar with the Lord's words in John, chapter 14, where He told His disciples,

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth... and He will tell you things to come” (John 16:12-13).

Many of you are also aware that the pronoun, He, in these verses is misleading, since the Spirit of truth is not really a person, at least not a person other than the Lord Himself who comes to us in “the clouds of heaven,” that is, the literal sense of the Word when it is illuminated by the spiritual sense. In fact the word for “He” in the original Greek can just as easily be translated “it,” which is no denigration of the Lord, for the spirit of truth really is the understanding of it, which comes to us when it is fully and properly explained – and of course, when we are receptive.

Turning back a few pages in the Gospel, some of you may also recall these words of the Lord in John 14:12-13: –

“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; *and greater works than these he will do*, because I go to My Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.”

Now here is a real challenge. But again, let's be clear about “the Father” and “the Son.” These, we know, are not two “persons” in God, but two essentials, that is, love and wisdom. And all the love of God is expressed in the wisdom of His own Humanity, the Divine Humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ – which is revealed to us through His Word. So when we read about the Father being glorified in the Son we are reading about the love of God shining through and being recognized in the teachings of the Word.

Still, how can anyone do greater works than the Lord? His works were almost all miracles, especially miracles of healing. And yes, there are many stories of other miracles done by the apostles after the Lord's resurrection (see especially the book of Acts), and there are occasional stories of miracles in our own time (though the skeptics are usually quick to cast doubt on their legitimacy). But where in the history of the world do we see any evidence of “greater works” than those done by the Lord?

In the early service this morning we discussed some of the Lord's miracles and we noticed how there was always “more than meets the eye” in them. In fact, every one has a spiritual meaning so that, for example, giving sight to the blind represents giving understanding to someone who has not understood before, and clearing up leprosy represents the cleansing of our minds, especially getting rid of cynical and selfish attitudes that corrupt the integrity of the Word in our lives, since leprosy corresponds to profanation. Now, as we explore what is meant by “greater works than these” we are drawn even more to the spiritual sense of the miracles and especially to the

teaching *about* the spiritual sense in the book, *The True Christian Religion*, and its sequel, *The Coronis*, or appendix to *The True Christian Religion*.

In the beginning of *The Coronis* (which means crown) we find a summary, or table of contents in which miracles are mentioned particularly in relation to the establishment of the Christian Church. From these passages and from many others elsewhere we get the message that miracles were “permitted” in former churches – not promoted but permitted – because it was the only way people could be convinced that they should pay attention to the Lord and follow Him. This was especially the case in the Jewish Church of the Old Testament but was also true for the people of New Testament times. In fact, we read, it was necessary for the Lord to do these things in order to be sure His new church – the early Christian Church – would take hold and be established among them after He was raised up out of their sight.

But even so, the miracles only “worked” in that sense for a limited time. Over and over, from the crossing of the Red Sea to the giving of the Ten Commandments, from the manna in the wilderness to the contest at Mt. Carmel, from the birth of Isaac to the conquest of Jericho and the raising of the dead, none of the miracles seemed to hold the attention of the people for very long as they continued to neglect the Lord and turn away from His teaching. It is the same in the Gospel stories: although great crowds followed Him as a result of His miracles, when push came to shove they all denied Him and turned from His Word to pursue their own ideas of what was good and true. So the miracles only held their attention as long as some other worldly influence didn’t seem to be more urgent or compelling.

It is the same today – except that since the Lord’s glorification a new level of clarity and perception is possible for people everywhere, and a new level of personal freedom has been established as a result of His work on earth. Now, as distinct from the more primitive times of our religious history, we have the ability if we wish to rise above the pressures and appearances of the natural world and truly grasp the importance of spiritual life, that is, the life of the spirit or mind. Now therefore we can understand and appreciate why miracles don’t really work as the primary means of establishing our faith: they are natural and external – based on experience, which is subject to various interpretations depending on one’s knowledge, judgment and point of view. So as soon as we begin to think about miracles, no matter how dramatic or compelling they may seem to be, we find ourselves in perfect freedom to diminish their importance, to forget significant parts of them, or even to explain them away completely. In fact, even if we accept them as true and convincing, they may not have much impact on our thoughts and attitudes because, after all, they are things that happen TO us or outside of us, not things that come from within. (To be sure, a miracle, or any dramatic event in our lives, can stimulate us to rethink a lot of things, and can help motivate us to change, but once the “rush” or glow of that experience wears off it is up to us in freedom to continue on that path or not.)

So we read in *The Coronis, On Miracles*,

“Miracles were done in the church before the Lord’s Coming because, at that time, people were external or natural, who could not be led to their representative worship except by miracles... And nevertheless, they never affected people.

“After the Lord’s Coming, when people from being external became internal, and

when the faculty of being able to know was imparted to people, miracles were prohibited.... (#I & II)

Obviously, this statement about being external or internal, and being able to know, does not relate to any fundamental change in human nature. People are the same now as they were since very ancient times. But what has changed is the potential for spiritual development, or what we call regeneration, and this on account of the Lord's subjugation of the hells, His re-organization of the heavens, and His establishment of the Christian Church. In short, we now know things about spiritual life that could not have been known before, and because of this we can think about and understand far more than ever before, and also live consciously on a more interior level than ever before – if we so choose.

Concerning this, Swedenborg wrote in his personal journal, evidently sometime in 1750 or 51,

“I spoke with angels about miracles at the time of the apostles, and about their speaking in other tongues, and that they clearly perceived the influx of spirits, saying that this occurred because it was utterly unknown everywhere that the Lord had come into the world, Who would save souls, *and that thus He would never be received by anyone without miracles*. It occurred also lest He be received by some like those who worship idols or people after death - which would have made worship idolatrous. For these reasons miracles were performed, *but now that doctrine has been received, they are no longer performed*. The implanting of truth and good with the gentiles is done by external means, but with Christians, who have the knowledge of internal things, the case is different” (SEm 4724).

Sadly, however, as the Christian Church in the fourth century became politicized and its doctrine began to be corrupted, it grew more and more difficult for people to sort the wheat from the tares, and so they were both allowed to grow together – even in the world of spirits – until the new, additional revelation predicted by the Lord in John and in the Apocalypse prompted the spiritual harvest, or judgment, of the mid-18th century, and along with it the establishment of a New Christian Church, and a full restoration of the freedom to know and understand. So we read, again from *Coronis*,

“For many reasons this New Christian Church is not being established through any miracles as the former was.

“But, instead of them, the spiritual sense of the Word is revealed, and the spiritual world disclosed, and the nature of both heaven and hell manifested; also, that people live after death – *which things surpass all miracles*” (table of contents L-LI & #44 & 52).

This phrase, “which things surpass all miracles,” is reason for the title and theme of this sermon. Nothing could be better; nothing could be more helpful; nothing could be more important for our spiritual lives than that we know and understand the spiritual sense of the Word.

“The question is asked (in *The True Christian Religion* #501) why miracles are not done as in times past, for it is believed that if they were to be performed everyone would be fully con-

vinced.” But the answer is given in *Apocalypse Explained* #1155 where we read, “If a person could be reformed by miracles and visions, then all people throughout the whole world would be reformed.” The Lord in His love would see to it! But the fact is that such things compel – at least outwardly – and so they prevent internal states from coming to light or being seriously addressed. Therefore they can actually hinder spiritual growth.

Now remember, the Lord Himself did great miracles even as He was revealing spiritual truths to His disciples. But they were not able to grasp those truths and so the miracles did no harm; but they did establish the Lord’s authority so that the Gospel could be written and the foundation laid for the next phase of church history (see AE 815).

And it is extremely significant in this context that the Lord said, “ he who believes in Me, *the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do*, because I go to My Father.” – Not just the same works, but “greater works.” What can this possibly mean?

Well, by now you may have some idea. The works that the Lord did were of course full of powerful spiritual meaning, but that meaning was not perceived by those whose who were affected by them. Nor did they understand the spiritual meaning of their own works, however dramatic they might have been. So they lived on the external, natural level, grateful, certainly, for the benefits they received from the Lord and for the powers He vested in them. But they knew nothing about the spiritual world or about the reformation and regeneration of the mind or spirit, and so any real *spiritual* progress they would make in their lives had to wait until they entered consciously into the spiritual world – after death. Furthermore they didn’t really understand the Lord Himself or what He had done *spiritually* for them, so although we know that such know-ledge is not necessary for salvation it was a major contributing factor in the confusion that developed in the early church – confusion that eventually corrupted the whole church.

Things are different now. Since the revelation by the Lord of the spiritual sense of the Word we have both the freedom and the responsibility to do “works” that really enlighten and inspire a *spiritual* life, not just a natural one. Although we can’t miraculously heal natural sicknesses or injuries, make water into wine, change the weather or raise the dead, we CAN with the Lord’s help do all the things to which these wonders correspond *in our hearts and minds*. So we have the opportunity to help ourselves and others rise above the things of the world to enjoy the peace and wisdom of more internal things. And since these are higher, better, more rewarding and more permanent than any natural blessings, they are, indeed, “greater” than the works that the Lord was able to do for the people of the primitive Christian Church.

Furthermore they are the special result of our internal, spiritual co-operation with the Lord, the outcome of choices and disciplines that we freely choose apart from any external need or compulsion, and that we do because we’ve thought about it and confirmed them in ourselves. This is what it really means to do the works of the Lord, and to do even greater works in our time.

Amen.

Lessons: *John* 4:46-54
 Children’s talk on the reluctant miracle worker
 Exodus 14: selections, and *Arcana Caelestia* #7290:selections