

Address for 5 September by Ash Leighton Plom

“Jesus sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha’, that is, ‘Be opened.’”

Living Lord Jesus, open our ears to hear, and our hearts and minds to truly listen, to your Word and Spirit before we share in your Sacrament today. Ephphatha. Amen.

Thank you everyone, and for those of you who don't yet know me, perhaps new or joining us online, my name's Ash, one of the ministry team here at St David's church Exeter with St Michael's Mt Dinham.

Today I want to confront these miracles reported in that Gospel reading head on, as well as the prophecies in the reading we had before, from Isaiah, as the readings presage one another.

Let me start with this word “ephphatha”, which is from the Aramaic ‘p̄thāḥ’, ‘to open’. St Mark’s gospel was originally written in Greek, so this Aramaic word would have sounded foreign or unfamiliar to most of his original audience, as much as it does to non-Aramaic audiences today.

The inclusion of words like “ephphatha” suggest that the incarnate Jesus' first language was Aramaic. Sure, he probably spoke Greek to Gentiles as it was the 'common tongue' of his area in those days, and he knew Hebrew from the Old Testament readings and prayers in the Synagogue, but St Mark especially chose to include this Aramaic word in his gospel, which tantalisingly hints at the sound of Jesus' native tongue. Just maybe marvel at that for a moment, that here we have the sound of Jesus' own voice.

Scholars debate St Mark's reasons for including this detail in his otherwise very pacy and briefest of gospels. Some say St Mark is just being thorough and accurate, but I'd personally look for thoroughness more from, say, St Luke, who tends to include extra historical facts, whereas St Mark is sometimes said to be writing an action movie version of the life of Jesus, and is usually circumspect and not really prone to including things he didn't need to.

I almost wonder if, rather, St Mark knew what we see today – that ‘foreign religions’ are interesting to some people, and so including unfamiliar words can intrigue them: compare for example “namaste”, originally from Hindu Sanskrit. I know several people who are not members of any related religion, but who use “namaste”. Similarly, I think there were some people in St Mark’s day, hungry for spiritual satisfaction outside their pagan pantheons and philosophies, allured by Eastern ‘mystery religions’ and who would have been attracted to St Mark’s use of “ephphatha” in our gospel reading today. I actually had a conversation with someone

in the parish only recently who told me strongly that she doesn't like Christianity, but prefers “eastern religions”, and so I pointed out to her that Christianity is an eastern religion, and she was then suddenly much more interested than she had been a mere moment before! So, possibly, St Mark included the word “ephphatha” for this sort of reason.

On another level, though, I think it operates as something like a magic word. Compare for example “abracadabra”, which may also be from Aramaic “avra kehdabra”, or “I will create as I speak”. And this is what I really want to get into today, because Christian magic and miracle healings can feel a little uncomfortable for some of us in our secular culture, but that’s exactly why they need talking about. So: I hope to encourage you to believe the miracles if you don't already, to perceive the miraculous in your own life, and to share this exciting hope of God's supernatural gracious activity in the real world with people in your life.

So, our Old Testament reading, written about 700 years before Christ, prophesies a time when “the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped... the lame shall leap like a deer, and the mute tongue sing for joy”. The Gospel reading records some fulfilment of these prophecies in the miracles of Jesus, and I wonder how you feel when you hear these sorts of claims today?

I’ve been rereading Hegel recently, who was an 18th Century ‘Enlightenment’ philosopher, and one of the most influential thinkers in Western history. As some of you will know, Hegel was preoccupied with explaining away the miraculous in the Bible and in religion in general. Hegel taught that religion was an outdated step in humanity’s development, which he believed had been made unnecessary because of what he saw as the victory of 'Reason'. Hegel conceded that Jesus could be revered as a good moral teacher, but he was so embarrassed by miracles that he argued they only *seemed* to be miracles to the ignorant people of the past, whereas, in Hegel’s opinion, enlightened, scientifically-minded modern people should believe that miracles are impossible, and so he just disregarded any evidence in the gospels that he felt weren't compatible with his own pre-conceived worldview.

However, I want to challenge Hegel and say that I don’t think his is an intellectually responsible or sustainable interpretation. Firstly, it’s a colonialist derision of the past, propelled by his *a priori* assumptions about his own ‘enlightened’ rightness. In fact, people in the 1st Century were no less human than we are today, and perfectly capable of reason and scepticism. Remember ‘doubting’ Thomas, who didn’t believe in the resurrection until he was persuaded by evidence? The writers of the Bible reported on miracles not because they’re absurdly credulous primitives, but rather precisely because they're reasonable people who witnessed astonishing events in the real world, and wanted to record the facts of these for posterity.

Contrasting with Hegel, C. S. Lewis helpfully set out that “it is a foolish thing that people often say about Jesus”, that he was just a “good moral teacher”, but that the miracles must have been misunderstandings or later fabrications. In the actual credible evidence, Lewis argues, you can’t separate out the teachings from the miracles, because the miracles are there precisely to evidence Jesus’ authority to teach, and they were recorded by honest witnesses who were as stunned by the miracles as anyone would be.

So, Lewis' point is that you can't have a congruent Christian faith while also having a worldview like Hegel's that denies the supernatural. Lewis actually calls Hegel's position, “patronising nonsense”, and says the evidence and miracles overwhelmingly show Jesus to be God in the flesh. Kierkegaard, a contemporary philosopher of Hegel, rightly noted in his response to Hegel, that Christianity is rather *defined* by miracles, including the incarnation, the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus. The miracles in Christianity aren't just a few weird supernatural incidents that you can set aside and still responsibly be a Christian – Christianity itself inherently testifies to great miracles as having happened.

For myself, as an historian and a convert from atheism, as I researched the evidence for the incarnation, death, and particularly the resurrection of Jesus, I found it reliable. I therefore realised I had to grow my assumptions as to what is possible, instead of just irresponsibly dismissing evidence that didn't fit my pre-existing worldview, like Hegel had done.

So, to sum up so far: we've seen that the Old Testament prophesies miracles, hundreds of years in advance, which the New Testament then records Jesus miraculously fulfilling. And I want to encourage you to believe the miracle of the prophecies and of the fulfilments, and to share the news of these with the people in your life. The first disciples were stunned to witness these miracles, and they recorded them for us precisely to build our faith in Jesus as someone who does fulfil miracles, and to give us a record of these miracles to pass on to others.

We often say, “I wish we had more young people in church,” or more children, more families, more students. But this is on each of us to warmly invite people we know. I mean, think of the benefit they're missing out on, musically, pastorally, eternally... uplifting worship, warm fellowship, hope for their future. We have incredibly good news to share - that God intervenes wonderfully in real people's lives - and we have great evidence collected by witnesses to substantiate our claims.

Jesus said that “greater things” than the miracles he performed would occur in and through the lives of his believers after his death, resurrection, and ascension, after the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This means we inhabit a world where, according to the word of Jesus himself, the extraordinary is possible, as God's Kingdom breaks in to real people's lives in tangible demonstrable ways today.

Let's expect miracles, let's be praying for them, and let's share this hope with others. Invite them to church online or onsite, on Sundays and throughout the week – if you're unsure when our times are, check the notices, get in touch with a service leader, or see our websites or social media. For example, as well as Sunday morning worship, we've got a course starting online next month, which will be a great thing to invite people to. I want to meet your invitees, in person or online, soon.

However, I want to land with a final word about the greatest miracle - of God with us. In our looking for miracles in our lives, let's not lose sight of the beautiful miracle we always have at hand: Jesus with us, especially when we come together for communion.

Kierkegaard pointed to the incarnation, resurrection, and ascension as some of the definitive Christian miracles – God come from heaven to earth *in person* to teach and to heal and to die and rise again as an assurance of our future resurrection to abide with him in glory... great news indeed, attested by great witnesses. But Jesus also gave us the eucharist, communion, the mass, as the memorial and sign of his abiding presence with us.

The great Anglo-Catholic theologian Lionel Thornton once asserted that as we receive the sacrament, we become miraculously "members of Christ's body which was nailed to the cross, laid in the tomb, and raised to life on the third day". This remains perhaps the greatest miracle in Christianity: Christ is with us by his Spirit, the awesome presence of God indwells us now as we gather for communion.

So, friends, open yourself to the flow of the Spirit in the prayers, in the sacrament and in the week ahead. "Water will gush forth", in the words of Isaiah, streams even in the desert. God in his grace is miraculously present, even in this present moment. Pray, be expectant, and share the good news of God's activity in normal people's lives with folk around you, bring them to encounter him, too, as you yourself deepen your encounter with his presence. Ephphatha - be opened. Flow. Amen.