

The last couple months, and especially the last couple weeks, have been difficult ones. Gas prices got so high during the summer that the news regularly called our attention to “pain at the pump.” Prices soared over \$4 a gallon for a while. Many of us changed our habits—perhaps we learned to combine trips and avoid unnecessary ones, began to carpool, walk, bicycle, or take the train or bus. It has been more painful for many of us to watch our investments sharply decline, especially those of us who are closer to retirement. Even more painful is the loss of income many of us have experienced—either because sales and commissions went down or because you lost your job because of layoffs. All of that is real pain.

But as bad as those things are, there is possibly no greater pain than the death of a son or daughter. The grief is impossible for anyone to explain, unless she has experienced it. If the baby was stillborn, or if a mother has a miscarriage; if a child is taken early in his or her days or if the son or daughter is fully grown. The grief is almost unbearable.

In our Gospel reading today, a man described as a royal official came to Jesus with a terrible need. This man was perhaps part of the royal family of King Herod, or an appointee or an ambassador—certainly a man of political power and standing. But what kind of comfort does that give if your son is ill? For a parent with a child who is sick to the point of death, what else matters? He was at the end of his rope. I am sure the boy had received all of the health care and attention available to a royal family at his day. But still his life was ebbing away. High fever, sign of infection, weaker and weaker as his body fought the fight and lost.

So, hearing that a great rabbi, a teacher with such faith that his prayers were effective and were heard by God and answered by him, was in the area, the royal official traveled the seven hours by foot from Capernaum to Cana. That in itself is an act of faith, isn't it? You don't travel for seven hours unless it is important—a trip filled with hope or desperation! This royal official had faith—faith in the promises of the LORD, the God of Israel; faith in his power to heal through a prophet devoted to prayer. We don't know if this official knew that Jesus was the PROPHET—the promised Savior, the LORD himself. Did he know who Jesus was? Probably he had witnessed some of the miracles in Cana (the changing of water into wine) or in Judea where he had healed many (demonized, lame, blind, deaf, mute).

There was one thing occupying his concern right at this time. “My son is sick and at the point of death!” The anticipation of his young life coming to a sad, premature end. The suffering of this boy, his young life nothing now but pain. “Come to Capernaum and heal my son.” Please! You're my only hope--my last hope.

Jesus' response sounds like a rebuke of the royal official: “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe.” Jesus is addressing a hardness of heart on the part of the Jews from Galilee—you demand signs and wonders. Or is it weakness of faith that

Jesus is rebuking? We need props, crutches for our faith? Not the royal official: “Please come down before my son dies.” A simple prayer. A prayer of trust.

And Jesus’ response to this simple prayer? “You may go. Your son will live.” He took him at his word. That is what faith is: taking Jesus at his word.

Our age, our people, are no different. How many people in this city are convinced there is no God, or are convinced that God’s just some distant, disinterested deity. Why? Because there hasn’t been a supernatural sign, an amazing miracle delivered in their sight. “Give me a sign, Lord!” If someone refuses to take God at his Word, there are many things that can be produced for evidence: Unanswered prayers, apparent injustices in the world, God’s supposed failure to provide what people demand, the problem of pain, and on and on.

But it is also interesting that for someone who does take God at his Word, plenty of evidence can be produced. God provides for all people, even those who are guilty. God does work through creation and natural processes to heal and feed. The unseen blessings and unrealized promises do not provide an obstacle, because we see them with the eyes of faith. If we would presume to demand from God a sign or wonder, we would presume to be his lord.

God doesn’t produce miracles on demand. He has been called a hidden God—he wants us to believe on the basis of his Word, not by proof. In fact, even if God would provide firm proof (like resurrection from the dead) people still would not believe. Some would pull out the various “rationalistic” explanations like this: “Jesus did not really do miracles, rather his disciples made it up or hallucinated or Jesus did some kind of trick.”

Notice that it was not Jesus’ will to produce a miracle on demand for the official or for the people of Capernaum. Instead, he did the miracle at a distance, and he rewarded the official who took Jesus at his Word. You might say that he went home with nothing but a Word in his pocket.

As he went home, either the next day or as he was on the second day of his journey home, a group met him on the way. They had good news: the boy had recovered! The official asked them when this happened, and they told him the fever left the boy the seventh hour yesterday--the exact time when Jesus had said the word. The official hurried home and found it to be exactly as the delegation had reported. What joy!

The official, then, had been brought to faith in Jesus not only as a miracle worker and great teacher, but as the Son of God, the Savior who had come to forgive their sins and give life now and eternal life in heaven. Not only the official, but his entire household believed, too.

All because of Jesus’ one little sentence: “You may go; your son will live.” That’s all the official had to go on. How much more do we have? We know so much more than he did. We know that this Jesus who works miracles, walks on water, calms the storms,

feeds the multitude is not just a prophet and miracle worker, but God himself, the “Word” who was at the beginning with God, and who was God, who became flesh and “fulfilled all righteousness”, and who offered himself on the cross.

We know that this Jesus, who rose from the dead, is at the Father’s right hand, always lives to intercede for us, and rules over all things for our good. We know him! You know him! He is here, and what a friend we have in him.

So whenever the newspaper headlines are depressing, when you look at a bill late in the month that is bigger than your checking account balance; when you check your financial portfolio and it is down yet again, when health is failing and loved ones pass away, remember for inspiration this unnamed man in Cana. Take Jesus at his Word. Go home confident that the promises made to you do not require immediate proof. They require simply the full trust and fidelity of the God of the universe. God will provide what he knows we need, no matter what the Dow Jones or Nasdaq say.

And notice something else about this miracle, and the way God treats the sign: Jesus did not do the miracle to convince anyone that he should have faith. The Word of God works the miracle of faith. The miracle of healing was given as a reward of faith, wasn’t it? Faith in Jesus opened the royal official’s eyes to see a miracle. Otherwise even this would have seemed to be a simple, natural event.

May God open our eyes to see his miracles all around us. Amen.