12 May 2019: Choral Matins  
The Third Sunday after Easter  
1 Kings 17:17–end, Luke 7:11–23  
The Revd Canon Graham Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity  
‘Miracles’

“O Lord my God, is this your care for the widow with whom I lodge, that you have been so cruel to her son?”

In each of our Scriptural lessons this morning we have a miraculous return to life of a young man, and it would be no doubt edifying to read these accounts in terms of their happy resolutions. “Look your son is alive,” Elijah says to the widow, handing her back the boy she knew had died. “The dead man sat up and began to speak; and Jesus gave him back to his mother” the narrator in Luke tells us. The crowds at the gate of Nain are in awe. “God has shown his care for his people,” they say. These are miracles even more spectacular in a way than healing the deaf or the blind, the leprous or the possessed because physiological life had left these two young men. They were corpses. But to just read these accounts as successful miracles or even as prefigurations of Christ’s own resurrection, is to erase some of the darker lines within what is being presented. The Scriptures are to be searched; not just read but read deeply that faith might understand the complexity of life in which faith is lived. We like happy endings, but what the gospel teaches us is that the positive never avoids difficulty; it arises when difficulty is faced and even endured. What is absolutely key is that our faith is based upon a relationship with God; and a real relationship has to learn to respect and honour the other even when the circumstances are very difficult.

That’s what Elijah’s prayer to God when the woman comes to him to say her son has died shows me: if I am to be real in my relationship with God then there are times when I have to ask, even demand, answers to relationship-threatening questions. “O Lord my God, is this your care for the widow with whom I lodge, that you have been so cruel to her son?” Being free in Christ allows us to give expression to hurt and incomprehension in the face of certain life situations. That’s fundamental, not only to deepening the reality
of our relationship with God, but fundamental also to our witness to other people; the
witness of lives carved by obedience to God.

Listen to the second part of that account in Luke of the widow’s son at Nain. John the
Baptist’s disciples hear of the miracle and come asking if Jesus is the Messiah, the
 Awaited One, and even more miracles are performed. “Go,” Jesus tells them, “and tell
John what you have seen and heard.” Our life experiences matter, even when they are
difficult (perhaps even more when they are difficult) because they shape and define the
reality of our witness. Christianity isn’t a religion of escape from the world. It isn’t a
comfort blanket. It isn’t a placebo. It can be made into an escape from the world. It can
be made into a comfort blanket and a placebo. But that’s not where its reality bites; nor
where its reality can be evidenced. And after all this display of Messianic power before
John’s disciples, success story piling up on success story as healing follows healing, what
does Jesus say? - “happy is the one who does not find me a stumbling-block.” Strange
that! Who would ever find a miracle worker a stumbling-block? But there is a stumbling-
block in miracles, even spectacular ones.

You see, there are darker lines of theological enquiry etched into these uplifting accounts
and they have to do with the way the gospel doesn’t run contrary to what we see and hear
around us. Our experience of life and our experience of God have to come together as
our faith grapples with trying to understand where God is, what God is. This isn’t to
deny miracles on some rationalistic basis, but it’s to recognise that with miracles (like
everything else in God) we treat mysteries; we treat things we don’t immediately get
answers to and spend, sometimes, years trying to understand - if we ever fully
understand. Of course, Elijah’s outraged question - “O Lord my God, is this your care
for the widow with whom I lodge, that you have been so cruel to her son?” – is answered,
and the mother who experienced and witnessed stark bereavement and astonished
deliverance could only confess in the face of incomprehension: “Now I know for certain
that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord on your lips is truth.” But what
if the son had not been brought back to life?

This complexity about miracles is something very personal to me, and so when a miracle
is proclaimed I hesitate and find myself grappling for deeper answers. I experienced this
recently with the horrendous massacre of worshippers on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka. It
was in fact a statement made by the Archbishop of Colombo hours after the event that
brought back the pain of my own incomprehension. St. Anthony’s shrine, where many
were killed, has been a place of miracles for centuries. The Archbishop said he should
have been there at the time of the bombing and only a delay at the episcopal office prevented him. His escape he said was a miracle. Others who survived the blast because of where they sat or stood where the bomb went off said similar things. No doubt this is a reaction of relief for not having been among the dead. But theologically that kind of language is very difficult. For many, over 200, no miracle took place in this place of miracles.

And no doubt I am not alone in knowing of people who have had dramatic, unexpected and inexplicable remissions in ravaging cancers whilst knowing also many for whom prayers were said and fastings made who did not have any such remission. I am one of four brothers, the eldest. My mother died of complications following Huntington’s Chorea. My two middle brothers died of the same genetic malfunction. My youngest brother and I escaped. But I cannot believe that I meant more to God than they did; that my salvation was more important than theirs. That would not demonstrate at all that “God has shown his care for his people” – in the words from St. Luke’s Gospel. A God who is love can show no partiality. A God who is love cannot intervene on behalf of one and not intervene on behalf of others. Someone’s proclaimed miracle cannot be another person’s devastating tragedy.

And that leaves us where exactly? It leaves us precisely with that statement Jesus made when he had out-performed all possible miracle healers in the face of the disciples of John the Baptist: “happy is the one who does not find me a stumbling-block.” Sometimes faith has to look life squarely in the face and take one more staggering step towards trying to understand. The resurrection never annuls the reality of the cross; it lives through it. And only grace makes that living possible.