

ON MIRACLES AND MIRACLE-WORKERS

4th Sunday after Pascha ~ the Paralytic

May 11, 2014

By Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev

Moscow, Church of the Icon of the Mother of God “Joy of All Who Sorrow”

Today at the Divine Liturgy we heard a reading about miracles performed by the holy apostle Peter: how he healed a paralytic and how he raised someone from the dead (Acts 9:32-42). And we heard the narrative from the Gospel of John of how our Lord Jesus Christ healed a paralytic who had lain in a sick bed for 38 years (Jn. 5:2-9).

The Holy Church, during this paschal season, presents us with two parallel readings — from the Gospel of John and from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, showing us that the miracles performed by our Lord Jesus Christ were also, by the grace of God, performed by the apostles. The Lord healed — and they healed; the Lord raised the dead — and his disciples raised the dead.

When we hear these narratives from the Gospel and the Book of Acts, we are led to ask the question: why was it that all of this was able to take place in those times, but these miracles do not occur today? Why were there miracles before, but they are no longer seen today? The actual fact is, that miracles were performed not only then, during the first centuries of Christianity, but are performed in our times as well.

We heard from the Gospel how an angel of God would enter into the water and trouble it, and the first person to enter into the water after this occurred would receive healing. This begs the question: “Is it possible for a miracle to happen on a regular basis? Is it possible for a miracle to occur according to schedule?” For example, like the miracle of the Holy Fire, which descends on Great Saturday in Jerusalem? What is this — “a miracle by order” on Great Saturday? For you see, an angel of God would likewise come down and trouble the water in the pool at an appointed time, also with fixed regularity.

Isn't it a miracle “according to schedule” when bread and wine become the Body and Blood of our Savior in the Mystery of the Eucharist at the Divine Liturgy? You see, if the liturgy is scheduled for seven o'clock in the morning, this means that this miracle will occur around eight o'clock. If liturgy is scheduled for ten o'clock, this means, depending upon how quickly the choir sings, this miracle will occur at eleven o'clock, eleven thirty, or in the most extreme case, at noon.

What does all this tell us? That the Lord entrusts his grace-filled power into the hands of men, and is ready to perform miracles in accordance with our schedule, that when we need it, miracles will occur. It was like this in the epoch of the ancient Church, and it is like this today.

We know that not that long ago — in the last century — St. John of Kronstadt, a great miracle-worker of the Russian land, performed many miracles which were witnessed by thousands of people. And we read about them not the same way that we read about the ancient miracles mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, for we understand that St. John lived in an epoch of not too long ago. And how many are the miracles which were performed by the Holy New-martyrs and Confessors of Russia, who spilled their blood for the faith and for the Church!

Miracles have always occurred in the Church, and they will continue to occur until the end of the age. The main miracle which daily occurs in the Church is the miracle of the Holy Eucharist, when bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ. The miracle is that sinful and weak people, each with his own faults or vices, approach the Holy Chalice and commune of the Body and Blood of Christ in the form of bread and wine, change, become new people and receive spiritual power and strength in order to bear the struggles of their life. This miracle is performed on many, many people, in all churches, without exception, and that healing from spiritual illnesses and the resurrection from spiritual death, which we, the shepherds of the Church, observe in many people, has always taken place and will always take place in the Church until the end of the age.

And yet we wonder: Why are there so few miracles in our contemporary life? Why do miracles, such as those described in the Book of the Acts of the Holy Apostles, or those which we know about from the life of St. John of Kronstadt, occur so rarely? Because there are so few people who are capable of living in such a way that make it possible for the Lord to perform miracles through them.

In his generation, John of Kronstadt was such a person, but besides him there was no one else. And although in his time there lived many people who performed good deeds, who were righteous and close to sanctity, yet only he was made worthy to receive the special gift from God to perform miracles. This says that there are no bounds to holiness and closeness to God. In the spiritual life man can achieve great heights, but the gift of miracle-working is only granted to those ascetics and spiritual strugglers who are made worthy of this gift by God because of living a special life which distinguishes them — because of their unceasing spiritual struggle of self-sacrifice. You see, we know that John of Kronstadt served the Divine Liturgy every day, that he received hundreds of people daily and that he almost never ate or slept. Although he was a married priest, probably very few of the ancient monastic strugglers rivaled the ascetical life that he lived. Because of such a holy life, because of the special boldness with which he turned to God in prayer, the Lord sent down upon him the gift of miracle-working, so that during the time of troubles which preceded the revolution and the epoch of persecution, many people would have faith that God exists, that He rules the Church, is active in it, and performs miracles through His chosen ones.

Today the Church continues to live by the grace of the Holy Spirit — the same Spirit which was granted to the apostles on the day of Pentecost. The grace of God is indisputably poured out through all of the Holy Mysteries of the Church: the Mystery of the Eucharist, the Mystery of Baptism, and the rest as well. Each one contains a particular gift of grace. Through the operation of grace a layman becomes a reader, a subdeacon, and after that a deacon, a priest, and a priest becomes a bishop.

Divine grace is poured out by the love of God the Father, and it is for this reason that miracles have occurred and will always occur in the life of the Church, when it pleases God and it is needed by the people, just like the the miracle of the descent of the Holy Fire in Jerusalem, which occurs every Great Saturday in the presence of thousands of people who are gathered in order to witness this miracle and to participate in it. Afterwards, this Holy Fire is kindled throughout various lands so that the faithful can light their vigil lamps with it.

Our Lord Jesus Christ created the Church in order for her to become the receptacle of His grace, so that every one who desires would be able to come to church, and if spiritually ill, to be healed, and if spiritually dead — to be resurrected to a new life in Christ; in order for each person to receive the miracle that he needs, for the strengthening of one's faith, for the acquisition of new powers and strength to continue one's journey through life, and to be led to salvation and the Kingdom of God.

Translated from the Russian by Archpriest Peter Olsen