

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday b cycle August 1, 2021

Woody Allen is arguably one of America's great filmmakers. Over the course of fifty years he has directed and appeared in many critically acclaimed films. Although not a man of faith, one of the recurring themes in his films is the apparent loss of faith in our secular world. Allen, now eighty six years old, once was asked if he would ever come to believe in God. His amusing response is worth sharing. "If only God would give me a clear sign from heaven such as making a large deposit in my name in a Swiss bank".

But we might ask if miracles necessarily lead to faith. The short answer is, "not always".

Consider our first reading today from the Book of Exodus. It begins:

"The whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.

The Israelites said to them, "Would that we had died at the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread". (Ex. 16:2-3)

One of the recurring themes in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, is "murmuring".

Is it not striking that only a month after the parting of the Red Sea and their liberation from bondage in Egypt, the Israelite complain of hunger. Could not the God who freed them from slavery satisfy their needs? To be noted is that the Israelites would rather be back in their former place of captivity, Egypt, where they were well fed.

The Israelites soon forgot the Lord's intervention in their life and showed a lamentable lack of faith and gratitude for their freedom.

By contrast, the God of Israel, hears their cries and responds to their needs, even though they are undeserving of his mercy:

"In the morning you shall have your fill of bread that you may know that I, the Lord, am your God".

The manna in the desert anticipates the True Bread come down from heaven, the Eucharist, our spiritual food and nourishment.

Emile Zola was a prominent nineteenth century French novelist who was a bitter and implacable enemy of the Roman Catholic Church. He was rabidly anti-clerical. Nothing was more ridiculous for this writer than the belief that the Blessed Mother appeared to a French maiden at Lourdes in the South of France. Once he set out to Lourdes with the hope of writing an expose of the revered place of pilgrimage.

But the unexpected happened. He witnessed a miracle.

A young eighteen year old girl named Marie was afflicted with three incurable diseases, namely, an advanced case of lupus, pulmonary tuberculosis and leg ulcerations the size of an adult's hand.

She emerged from the baths completely cured.

A medical doctor who recognized Zola, asked him for his reaction to the cure in view of his caustic comments on the Catholic Church. His reply speaks volumes about unbelief. "Were I to see all the sick cured at Lourdes, I still would not believe in miracles".

If we choose to cut ourselves off from the supernatural, no miracle is going to make a difference.

In today's gospel, the crowd asks Jesus, "What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you?" (Jn. 6:30)

How telling that so many refused to have faith in Christ even after he performed many signs. If a miracle leads to faith, it may not last very long. More sign will be demanded.

Faith is an unmerited gift. But through our own free choice, we can choose to freely relinquish the gift. And that is one of life's great tragedies!

Today, a robust faith is desperately needed in our secular society. Regrettably, the signs of unbelief are unmistakably present in so many quarters and ought to be of concern to all those who take God's revelation seriously.

But the good news is that we can make a difference!