

THE MIRACULOUS STILLING OF THE STORM

by William C. Magee

Magee's theological analysis of the biblical miracle where Jesus calms the storm, exploring the significance of Christ's authority over nature and His intervention in human peril as a demonstration of divine power and care.

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Lord gave us: we perish.... Then he arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm.—Matthew 8:25-26. The story of this miracle reveals to us Christ entering into peril together with His Church. It records for us her faith and her prayer. It reveals to us His presence and His power. That faith has been her faith, that prayer has been her prayer, from that hour until now. In all the long-perilous voyage of the Church from that hour, never has she unlearned yet her first prayer; never has she become entirely unconscious of her Lord. Sometimes with a great and a fearless faith that defied the most terrible tempests, sometimes with a little and a timid faith, that shrank from the first ripple upon the deep, but ever with her real faith have Christ's Church and Christ's disciples turned in the hour of their tribulation to seek their Lord. And never has that prayer been said in vain. Never from the Church at large, or from the solitary disciple in his terror, has that prayer gone up without an answer. Never has the eye of faith sought, and sought in vain, the Savior. Ever has the praying Church or the praying disciple found the still present Christ; and we believe that it is so now. We believe that Christ our Lord is here in the midst of us now, and that our eye of faith may see Him, and our prayer of faith may reach Him. And if this be so now—if Christ's presence be a real fact amongst us now, and our prayer have really a might to reveal that presence—then, above all things, it concerns us, that we understand the nature of that prayer, and the manner of that presence, that we understand what it is we mean, and what will come of it when we say: "Lord, save us, or we perish."

We ask you, then, to-night, brethren, to consider these two things: the meaning of the Church's prayer; the manner of her Lord's presence. Now, when we use these words: "Lord, save: we perish," we are really rehearsing two articles of our belief. We are declaring, first of all, that we believe there is a Lord—that in the visible world there is an invisible God with His overruling, and controlling, and appointing will; and, in the next place, we believe that this God is our Lord Jesus Christ. In the first of these, we Christians agree with every religion that ever has been. In the second, we differ from all other religions. When we say that above nature there is a will and a personality, we say what every religion says. Religion is nothing else than the belief in the supernatural, in something above nature, in a person, in a will; and prayer is nothing but the speech of our spirit to that will, and the submission of our will to it. Prayer is the effort of the spirit of man to rise above the visible up to the region of the invisible and the personal, there to speak out his care or his need. There can, therefore, be no prayer without this element of religion; and there can be no religion without this fact of prayer. Without it, you have philosophy, you may have sentiment; but you cannot have a real, practical, every-day religion. And, therefore, all religions have believed in a God or gods, a Lord or lords. Turk, Jew, heathen, in like case, would have said to some lord or other: "Save, or we perish." But the Christian believes something more. He believes that his Lord has come down amongst men; that He has taken to Him human flesh, and lived a human life, and died, and risen again, for his salvation. He worships not only a lord, but the incarnate Lord; and so the Church speaks her twofold faith in her great hymn from the first to

Christ as God: "We praise Thee, O God; we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord"—Thee, and none other, to be the God, and Thee to be the Lord, and Ruler, and Master of all things. You see, then, that there is something different in Christian prayer from all other prayer and worship, and that the difference consists in this: that it is distinctively and avowedly the prayer to an incarnate Christ.

Now, if there be this difference between this prayer and all other prayer, then there must be a corresponding difference in the feelings and in the practical results of such a religion; and I am about to ask you now to follow me while I endeavor to trace for you this difference between Christian prayer and all other prayer. It seems as if the story in the gospel of this miracle exactly sets out this difference—exactly shows us the distinctive nature of Christian prayer. The story, you observe, divides itself, naturally, into three parts. There is, first of all, the voyage before the storm; there is, then, the storm; and there is, then, the miraculous stilling of the storm. Now, you observe that in each of these three parts, we have one thing in common. We have man, in some way or other, encountering, or encountered by, the outward and visible world. The third of these—the stilling of the storm—differs from the other two in this, that it is miraculous and supernatural. Now, let us, for a moment, leave out this third part. There are some, you know, who say, that we should always leave it out, and be better without it. Let us leave out, then, this third or miraculous part of the story; and let us contrast the first and the second parts. And what have we got? We have got a most remarkable contrast between the two scenes. What is it we see in the first scene? We see a man subduing nature. It was by the knowledge of the elements and the laws of nature, that man learned thus to sail upon the deep; and in that one fact you have represented for you the whole of the material progress of humanity—all the triumphs of science, all the glory and the beauty of art, all that marvelous mastery that man obtains by his inventive and creative will over the secret powers of nature, as he unlocks them one by one, and compels her to tell him her deepest mysteries—all that man has done as he has advanced from horizon to horizon of discovery, finding still new worlds to conquer, until we stand amazed at our own progress and the infinity of it, and we say of man: "What manner of being is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?" Yes, there is the man the lord of nature. There is nothing supernatural there. All is natural, all is orderly. Man is lord and master. Nature is man's servant; and, therefore, there seems no room, there seems no need for prayer. There is nothing, seemingly, there to be had for the asking; there is everything, seemingly, there to be had for working. Man is to be seen walking in the garden of his own planting and his own fencing; and he reaches out hands to unforbidden fruits of knowledge; and he believes that at last he shall gather even of the tree of life. He is a god unto himself, and he sees no need for prayer. And now we turn to the second scene, and what have we there? We have the direct contrast with this scene. We have there, not man subduing nature, but nature subduing man. We have the storm in which the elements are man's masters and not his servants; and he that one minute before was the boasting lord of nature is its toy and its sport. The very foam upon the crest of those billows is not more helpless in the grasp of the elements than the lord and the king of them; and they toss him to and fro, as the wind drives the stubble in the autumn. This is the terrible aspect of nature. This is nature in her might, and in her majesty, and in her pitilessness, and in her capriciousness—when nature seems everything, and man, in her awful presence, dwindles and dwarfs into very nothingness—when man, in the presence of the vastness of her solitude, and the might of her storms, and the terror of her earthquakes, seems no more before her, with his little cares and his sorrows, than the wee bubbles upon the head of the cataract. This is nature as she masters man. Is it, then, any wonder that, in the early struggles of

mankind with this terrible visible power of the creature, men came to worship the creature—that they ascribed to every one of these powers a divinity, that in the voice of the wind, and in the roar of the sea, and in the raging of the fire, they saw the signs of a divine presence, and they said to these elements: “Spare us,” or “Save us, or else we perish”? And so all creation became peopled with gods—cruel gods, capricious gods, vengeful gods, gods whom men bribed with blood, gods whom, even while they bribed them, they could not love, and did not believe that they loved them. This is the first and most terrible form of creature worship; this was the idolatry of the heathen. But mark this, that such a worship as this could not continue forever, could not continue long, because it is the worship of ignorance; it is the belief in the supernatural, only because it confuses the unknown with the supernatural. Ever as science advances must this faith melt away. Ever must the domain of the known push itself forward into the domain of the unknown. Ever does the man of science take one by one the gods of the man of superstition and break them upon their pedestals, and tell him this: “What you worship is no god. What you worship is no lord. It is not your lord. It is a servant of yours; and I class it in this or that rank of your servants.” So, one by one, like ghosts and fancies in the dawning of the day—one by one, the fancies of gods that haunted the night of the old world vanish before the dawn of knowledge. But then it is a terrible daylight that breaks on men—a blank, dreary world in which men have no sight of the invisible, no sense of the supernatural. It is that last and most terrible aspect of nature, when she appears, not as many gods, or many wills, but as the great soulless piece of mechanism, of which we are only part—a terrible machinery in which we are, somehow or other, involved, and in the presence of which the sense of our free-will leaves us. The pith, and the manhood, and the vigor of men, and the beauty and the freedom of their life die out of them as they stand appalled before this passionless, this terrible, this awful face of a soulless world. This is the last and the most terrible form of creature worship. And mark this, that between these two aspects of nature, if you have no assured faith, there is no logical resting-place. Without the act of faith, you must take your choice between the superstition of ignorance or the atheism of knowledge. And now we have seen these, we turn to the third portion of our story; and what is that we see there? We see, again, in this world of men, the miraculous and the supernatural. We hear a prayer, and we see a miracle. In the face of the might of nature and the terrors of her elements there arises up a Man in answer to man’s cry—there is heard a Man’s voice, which is yet the voice of God; and it rebukes the winds and the sea, and the elements of nature own their real Lord; and immediately there is a great calm. What is it, then, that we see? We see a miracle, and a miracle that answers to prayer; we see the living spirits of living men, in the hour of their agony and their distress, appealing from nature to the God of nature; and we have recorded the answer of God to man’s prayer. The answer is, that God is Lord both of man and of nature; and we say, therefore, that the miracle, and the miracle alone, sufficiently justifies the prayer. We say that the reason why men may pray is, and can only be, that they know and believe, that there is a will which rules the visible. If you have not this belief, then believe us that all prayer, whatever men may say about it, is an unreality and a miserable mockery. To what am I to pray if I see no living God to pray to? Am I to pray to a law? Am I to pray to a system? Am I to pray to the winds, or to the waves, as men prayed of old? Am I to pray for physical blessings and deliverances? Men tell us we are not to pray, or to give thanks, concerning the rain or fruitful seasons, for that science has told us that the supernatural has no place there. Am I to pray then (for men do tell me that I may pray) only for spiritual and for moral gifts? Am I to pray only to be made wise, and good, and pure, and true, and holy? Ah! science is beginning to

meet us there, too; for she is telling us, and telling us loudly, and telling us shamelessly, that here, too, there is no room, so far as she can tell, for prayer, as our mind is but a part of our body, and that our spiritual condition is a necessary result of our past history and of our present temperament—that we are what we are by virtue of birth and education, and country, and clime, and other things over which we have no control. And so the very spirit of man, all that is left of the invisible, vanishes before the approach of science. The knife of the anatomist lays bare, as he tells you, the secrets of man's being; and he finds no soul—he finds only the gray matter of the brain and the white threads of the nerves; and this is all that is left. Then, if we are not to pray, may we at least praise? Men say that if it is a folly to pray, at least it is a wisdom to praise; and they tell us this is the sentimental theory of the modern gospel. They tell you: "You may not pray,—prayer has no place in our system,—but you may praise; you may lift up your heart in hymns of joy and gratitude to the great Father of your being; you may have festival and flower-crowned processions in honor of the Supreme Being; yes, you may in fine weather, when you are sailing over summer seas, and the pleasant summer wind is filling the sails of your bark, and is wafting sweet odors from the flower-crowned shores along which youth, and hope, and joy are passing—then you may lift up your hearts in thanks to the Father that gave all these, if you do not forget it. But how is it in foul weather? How is it when the sky above us darkens, and the white crests of the waves beneath us are swelling sharp and fierce, and the jagged edges of the rocks are projecting for our shipwreck, and the wild waste of the waters is yawning below us, and we tremble and shudder at their depths, and the wild wind blows our prayer back into our bosoms—is that the time to sing sentimental hymns to our great supreme Father and Giver of all good? It is a time (thank God, thank Christ, for this) when the Christian, when the disciple of Christ, may hold fast his faith and say, "Tho he slay me, yet will I trust in him"; but it is not a time when the deist has breath to sing his hymns to the supreme Author of his being. No, we believe that there is a miracle that justifies, and alone justifies prayer. We know that there are those (and they are good and wise men, many of them) who contrive nice adjustments and philosophical explanations how prayer may be reconciled with universal law. We do not greatly care for these. They may be right; they may be wrong. In some future state and higher condition of our being we may know how far they are true, how far they are false; but, meanwhile, we need not be too nervously anxious to make room for almighty God to work His own will in His own world. We believe in the miracle of creation; we believe that there was once a voice that said, "Let there be light, and there was light"; we believe that at the sound of that voice the universe leapt into life; and we believe in the miracle of the Incarnation, when God took human flesh and dwelt amongst men; we believe in the miracle of the descent of the Spirit of God, when, with the miraculous sound of the rushing wind and the miraculous gleam of the fire, God once more came down to dwell amongst men; we believe in the miracles that are written for us in this Book, were they ten times as many as they are; we believe that the sea has stood on one side like a wall, and that the waters have gushed forth from the rock; we believe that bread has been rained from heaven; we believe that a touch has awakened the dead—we believe all this; and, because we believe it, we believe the voice when it says to us, "Pray"; and because we hear that voice still amongst us, and because we know it to be the same voice, we say, as we hear it, "Lord, save, or we perish." But still, in the last place, it may be said to us: If you do believe that there is this power of miracle amongst you still, and that it will answer to your prayer, why is it that we do not see more miracles than we do? Why is not the world filled with strange miracles every day, considering the infinite number of men's needs, and the infinite

number of human prayers? My brethren, it does seem to me that if we were merely deists, and did not believe in Christ, it would be difficult for us to answer this objection. The spirit of man has, however (thanks be to God for it), in all ages been deeper and truer in its instincts than his mere logical power. Even the deist (and we thankfully acknowledge it), though inconsistently and illogically, yet really and truly prays. For us Christians there is not any difficulty. There is that difference in our prayer of which I spoke. To whom is it that we pray? Not merely to the invisible Lord or Creator of the past, but to the incarnate Lord of the present. We believe that Christ our Lord, to whom we pray, took flesh and dwelt amongst us, and we believe that He did so that He might work the greatest of all miracles—the salvation of the souls of men; and we believe that He wrought it by dying and by living again. We believe that He established in the world this great and miraculous law, that it is possible out of death to bring life—nay, that death is the way to life. If this be so, that by His death life was purchased for us, then He teaches us that there is another life than this, and that there is another death and a deeper death than that we fear; and He tells us, it may be, that even by dying we shall be saved, that He will not always save us from death—nay, that He may save us by death. And so it comes to pass that we understand how, by losing life, we may miraculously save it; and yet, on the other hand, by trying to save life, we may naturally lose it. So we come to understand this fact, how the beginning of His kingdom was full of miracles, and how, in the history of His kingdom, miracles have since ceased. The kingdom began with miracles that He might teach us that He was able to save; the miracles ceased in order that He might work a greater miracle. The lesser miracle of ruling nature ceased in order that the greatest of all miracles might perpetually be wrought—the regeneration, the redemption, and the glorification of the nature of man. And so we understand that Christ our Lord, because He is our Lord, may save us, even while we seem to perish, and to perish in His presence. He saved us of old by His agony and bloody sweat, by His cross and passion; and He will save us now, and He does save every child of His. Through agony and sweating, through cross and passion—through the agony of our long nights of spiritual darkness, through the sweat of long days of sore trouble and labor, beneath the weight of sharp and heavy crosses and sorrow, and through the bitterness of spiritual or bodily passion, does Christ our Lord still save those who cry to Him, even while He seems to sleep and not to hear them, as, in the bitterness of their souls, thinking themselves Christ-forsaken, they cry, “Our Christ, our Christ, why hast Thou forsaken us? Dost Thou sleep, Lord? Save us, or we perish.” And so you understand the peculiarity, the blest and the glorious peculiarity, of our Christian prayer. You understand the meaning of those deep words of Scripture—patience and the faith of the saints. You understand how the Christian man may pray and wait, and wait and pray still. If prayer were always followed by a miraculous answer, then prayer would be easy enough; or, on the other hand, if there were no thought of an answer, then it might be possible, though not easy, to submit ourselves to the inevitable. But to pray and not to receive an answer, and yet to believe that the very not receiving is an answer; to cry, “Save, or we perish,” and to seem about to perish; to believe that in what seems perishing is really salvation; to look for the living and watchful Christ, and to see what seems only the living and regardless Christ, and yet to believe that the time will come when, at His word, there shall be a great calm—this is the patience, this is the faith of those who worship an incarnate Lord. And so we trace the history of Christ’s Church, and so we strive to trace the history of our own lives. Comparatively easy it is to trace the Church’s history along her voyage. The Church gives time for comparing events and testing faith; and so, believing still in the presence of her living Lord, the litanies of His Church ring out, as they have ever rung,

clearly and loudly, and high above the roar of the tempest and the rushing of the waters, still the prayer is heard, "Good Lord, deliver us"; and still, again and again, as the storm sweeps by, and the Church passes out into calmer waters, still comes the voice of thanksgiving: "He hath delivered us." Even in our shorter voyage, are there none of us who can remember times when we have knelt in agony and wrestled in prayer with the Savior, who seemed to have forgotten us, when the mighty storm of temptation and the billows of calamity seemed about to destroy us, and when we have cried (oh, how men do cry in those storms of the soul, in those tempests and terrors of the heart, "Lord, save us, or we perish!" to Him to save us, and He has seemed to sleep and to refuse to save? But at the last we can remember how He did reveal Himself, not stilling the raging storm when we would have had Him still the terrible tempest, not sparing, it may be, the precious bark that we had rigged, and manned, and launched ourselves with trembling hopes and loving prayers, and watched with eyes tearless with agony, as we saw it about to sink before us; and we have been led to see and believe that the living and the loving Lord was answering even then our prayer, for the bark has, at length, entered that haven where we would be, and where the vexed waters of our voyage never awake a ripple on the calm depths of its eternal peace. This has been the experience of more than one of this great multitude that I see. And there is another experience that each one of you may have: it is when, in the troubles of your own spirit, when in the agonies of your own grief-stricken heart, when in the depths of your own repentance, when in the storms of your own fear and your own doubt, you cry to Christ the Savior—when you bring your sins as some men bring their sorrows, as anxious to have them removed as the others—when you cry to Christ your Savior: "Lord, save me! Save me, a sinner! Save me, an unprayerful man hitherto! Save me, an unbelieving man hitherto! Save me, not merely from the hell hereafter, but the present storm and depth of my own sins that threaten to destroy me! Save me, or I perish!" For, brethren, be sure of this, sooner or later this will be the experience of every such vexed and terrified soul—that, after he shall have endured, so long as his Lord sees good, the terrifying storm and the threatening deep that drive him in closer and closer search and seeking after his Lord, then, at last, there will appear the form of the Son of man, the form of Him who hung upon the cross, that He might for ever in the world's history work this great and, to Him, dearest of all miracles; and, at last, He will rebuke the winds and the waves in that troubled soul, and there will be a great calm—a calm that may not last for ever, a calm that will not last for ever, for we have not yet reached the haven of perfect rest, but a calm that is a foretaste of the eternal rest. And so, praying with all our hearts to Christ our Lord, setting our will in submission to His will, pouring out our spirit in prayer to His Spirit, laying bare our hearts before His pure and loving eyes, through calm and through storm, praying still that we suffer not death in either, that we neither rot in the calm nor founder in the storm, praying still for His presence, praying still for grace to realize that presence, crying still for that deeper and yet deeper faith which is the result of more and more constant experience, crying still, "Lord, save, or we perish," wait in patience and in faith until He shall send His last messenger in this world, His angel of death, and bid him for us and in His name rebuke for the last time the winds that have vexed us, and the waves that have terrified us, and then with Him for ever there shall be a great calm.

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