

*Once there was nothing. Now there is a world. And you don't believe in miracles?*

The University of San Francisco goes back to 1855 and so has been collecting books for a long, long time. Among other treasures it has by now shelf after shelf of editions of the writings of theologians dating back well beyond modern times – prior even to 1000 AD. To us nowadays their ancient interpretations of Scripture may seem quaint but to those with ears to hear even today they retain a resonance that time cannot mute.

One such bishop named Saint Caesarius of Arles lived around 500 AD – a time when the once strong and stable Roman Empire was collapsing under the pressure of German migrations (barbarians, those fellows with beards). These newcomers were not likely to grasp the abstract theological language then current in the Roman Church. They preferred images over ideas, a dramatic world more so than a world of logical connections.

And so when explaining to these newcomers the Gospel story in which Jesus changes water into wine they used that miracle to assure them that Jesus (and Christianity) had no intention to trash their former beliefs, to pour their heritage down the drain. He only came to improve by way of divine grace the quality of what they had: “the waters retain their fullness, but by a secret infusion they receive another kind of power.”

The Church did not puritanically wish to annihilate the values of other cultures and certainly not those of the Old Testament – but baptized them in the belief that thanks to the Incarnation of Christ nothing human is without the potential to become divine, to blossom into something astonishing. Their inherited gods no longer had a monopoly on divinity; it was ours as ordinary human beings to possess as well.

[Which in the long term and on the secular level meant: absolute monarchs of the world beware; colonists are warehousing their rights within the Concords of the future.]

True, there are so many miracles in the Gospel that audiences might begin to doubt so many could have happened. But here Caesarius resorts to nature itself – as is! So, says Caesarius, you wonder how Jesus could walk through doors after his resurrection! Have you ever seen the seed of a fig tree? The tiniest thing imaginable. And yet in it are already the roots, the leaves, the fruit – all present in the seed, waiting to burst free. So Caesarius goes on to say: “No one gives a reasonable explanation for such an everyday reality, and do you ask me for an explanation of miracles? . . . What God creates is still more miraculous and we don't wonder about it. Once there was nothing and now there is a world!”

Excuse my rambling but still: Great stuff! – gathering dust upon the shelves of USF! And in many ways as up to date as Heidegger.