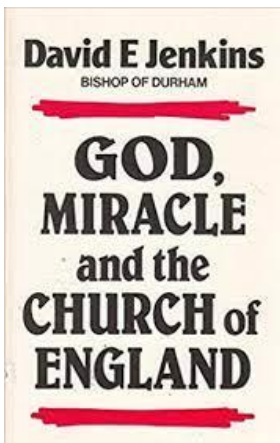


David Jenkins. God, Miracle and the Church of England. (1987)



Like flares and tank-tops, it's difficult to tell if David Jenkins – former Bishop of Durham – is out-of-date or back in fashion. This book finds itself located in advance of the uncertain vote on the ordination of women and before the Church of England made house-room for a more fundamentalist view of scripture (and when you could get a book for “£4.95 net”). His frequent potshots at evangelicals betray that former time when Liberals had no conceivable challengers and so, some of his doubts and assumptions will sound angular to a modern audience.

Make no mistake, this is a cheap book thrown together quickly to make something of a series of lectures Jenkins made in Oxford and elsewhere. But it has a wistful feel to it, reminding us there was a time when what bishops said was thought to contribute to the wider national conversation.

Jenkins starts by declaring the morally reprehensible view of a God who will intervene into history to heal an individual but do nothing in the face of the Holocaust. There is no room for that in his orbit. His view of the miraculous is to enable the full flourishing of the natural: for him, supernatural is unnatural and therefore unGod-like. And he points out that the original stories of the greatest miracle – the resurrection – leave plenty of room for doubt and interpretation.

Later he satirically poses the question of whether God pushed Theodosius off his horse: his death from this accident meant the vote in the crucial debate at Calcedon, defining the church's understanding of God, went the way it did.

As an academic, he is keen to embrace all forms of knowledge and inquiry so that 'mystery' doesn't conceal muddle and theology can have an adult dialogue with science and the arts. To this end, he reminds his audience that History is a modern invention and that the Gospels are not part of that discipline. Their honest truth is to be found elsewhere and we need to find new metaphors that relate to people's experience today.

But for all his Liberal assumptions, Jenkins' faith is profoundly centred on the person of Jesus. Our understanding of God can only be true insofar as it looks like what we know about him. So, much-favoured triumphalist imperial images of God – and indeed, the church – need to be jettisoned for the Servant-God, characterized by creative and permissive love, not coercion.

This is a somewhat unrefined book – more notebook than crafted literature. But what the then Bishop of Durham scribbled on the back of an envelope nearly 40 years ago still raises important questions for us today and maybe now stands even more as a particular challenge to the assumptions of the contemporary church.