

## **Sermon at St John's for Epiphany 3 2019**

*John 2. 1-11, 1 Corinthians 12. 1-11, Isaiah 62. 1-5*

Let us pray. Heavenly Lord, transform the poverty of our hearts by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our life together make known your glory. Amen

There is something mysteriously significant about John the Evangelist beginning the ministry of Jesus with a wedding banquet...

Matthew has Jesus starting his ministry, as one might expect, with a sermon. Mark has Jesus healing a man with an unclean spirit. And in Luke, Jesus' ministry begins with an act of worship, in Nazareth, on the Sabbath day. But John is different, and in the richly symbolic texture of his Gospel, he turns our attention to a wedding, at Cana of Galilee – just up the road from Nazareth, where Jesus grew up.

Jesus, with his mother Mary and his disciples - like some of us, here at the wedding of James and Claire, celebrated yesterday - is simply there as a guest, enjoying the hospitality and solemnity of this joyful occasion, as a man and woman (unknown to us) become husband and wife: always an intimate occasion for rejoicing and celebration.

And something remarkable happens: Jesus, at the prompting of his mother, does something profound and unexpected. When it's discovered that the wine has run out (always a bad omen, at a party!), Jesus, despite his initial reluctance, miraculously changes water into wine, so that everyone is able to feast and to share in this joyful celebration.

Now I don't know how good you are at maths – it's never been one of my strong points – but when one looks at the quantities of wine involved, it's really quite staggering... It says in the story that Jesus changed the contents of six stone waters jars (for the Jewish rites of purification) into wine. Well, scholars tell us that each jar would have held a firkin, or 20-30 gallons; which means that six of them would have comprised 150 gallons, or 800 bottles, of the best quality wine. Now I'm not even sure that Trinity College could compete with that!

One has to remember of course, that Middle Eastern weddings, then and now, were on a different scale, from what we're used to... usually the whole village turning out, and the festivities – as those of us that have been to Asian weddings will know – lasting, often, for several days. So we're talking about a different scale. But however you look at it, the symbolism of God's gracious generosity and abundance, in Jesus' turning of water into wine, is quite staggering – something bigger and more significant than we can easily get our mind around.

So John, taking the traditional symbolism of a marriage feast for the Kingdom of God (which we see throughout the Bible – and it's there in our first reading), seems to want us to glimpse, in new and radically different ways, the significance of Jesus' coming, for the world. For this is, above all else, an eloquent sign of the new and world-transforming thing that God is doing, through the coming of his Son, the Light to the nations.

'A week is a long time in politics', and it would seem that there is a direct relevance of today's readings to the complex and fast changing melee in our nation around the politics of Brexit. A week ago Parliament was building up to its seminal vote on the Prime Minister's Brexit agreement. Since then we've had a vote of 'no confidence' in the Government. And despite cross-party negotiations, all the evidence suggest that Parliament, and people, are as divided as ever on Brexit – and not just Brexit versus Remain, but what kind of Brexit, with a myriad of more than six different scenarios, including the potentially catastrophic 'no deal' being considered by key political groupings.

But to stand back from the detail of this seemingly endless political debate, what seems to be happening – more than ever (& the same can be seen across the Atlantic) – is that we, as human beings, are becoming more divided; people are no longer respecting each other (in our differences), and our capacity to work together, as fellow human beings (each made in the image of God), for the common good, is becoming tragically diminished. As the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama says, in his new book on identity politics, which underscores the rise of populism, "Modern liberal societies are heirs to the moral confusion left by the disappearance of a shared religious horizon."

In other words, to put in in plain English, our society no longer embraces the Christian narrative that we all belong together – and must strive together for the common good – but instead looks for scapegoats (those who are not like us) whom we can blame for the challenges we face. As Martin Luther King once put it, 'Unless we learn to live together as brothers [and sisters], we will perish together as fools.' And this week, as well as a critical week in Parliament, is also the 'Week of Prayer for Christian Unity', when Christians – the world over – are reminded that we too must belong together, and work together (whatever our differences), for in Jesus Christ we are all One.

So how might our Gospel today – the story of Jesus changing water into wine, at a wedding at Cana - be relevant, and speak into the theological challenge of our society, and indeed of our own Christian community at St John's, today, in 2019?

For St. John, the wedding at Cana – the opening sign of Jesus' ministry – is, for those with eyes to see, a dramatic parable of the new reign of God (his Kingdom), as it's called to be, on earth, as it is in heaven. An exciting and world-changing reality that could not be more different from the sorry state we often, as human beings – left to our own devices – find ourselves in. And this concrete reality, whose contours of generosity and abundance, as well as reconciled diversity, we have already noticed, is (above all) the work of Christ, among us, with whom we need to co-operate, if we are to be part of his saving work in the world.

In other words the wedding at Cana, on this third Sunday of Epiphany, is our biggest hint yet of how God in Christ works, and how we're invited to join with him, in order that his Kingdom may come, and the world (of division and injustice and hatred and violence) might be forever changed, his Church the first fruits of a new reconciled humanity, of gracious abundance, generosity and true freedom.

And this means not only that we must challenge our fellow citizens and political leaders to strive for respect and integrity and compassion, in the political choices we face, but also that here – at a local level, in the church's mission – we must risk gracious hospitality and generosity and abundance, in our relationships and partnership with others, not least in the work of 'partnership for missional church' and in our developing vision for the use of our renewed community facilities, 'enlarging our tent'. For the Gospel is never word only, but always 'word made flesh', as our faith in Jesus becomes real, through our risk-taking generosity, our relationships, and embedded in our community and daily living.

For God in Christ is always abundantly generous and patient and kind; he always seeks to fill us and give us his love, however challenging this may be. He is always turning water into wine, as we share his grace, his gifts and the hospitality of his Kingdom: a commonwealth of love that knows no limits.

Christ longs, in this new reign of God, to draw his people together as one, and to draw others in, to share his feast of life, as we gather to receive the eucharist, a foretaste of God's eternal Kingdom: drawing together not only the wise and the intelligent, but little children, as well as the poor, the lame, the sick and the blind, all those injured by life, and peoples of different races and colours and creeds, creating a rich unity out of reconciled diversity.

Yes, Christ longs that we might become (here at St John's) another Cana in Galilee, another parable of the love of God – shaped by abundance and generosity and faithfulness. For in him is a wellspring of life and love and healing and communion, and here (as at Cana in Galilee) as we offer ourselves to God, we receive gifts beyond measure, bread and wine beyond price – overflowing in love for all people. *Amen*