

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Epiphany 16th January 2022

It's party time! Well you might well groan at that phrase given this week's political shenanigans but it is indeed a party – a legal one - that we find Jesus at in our Gospel today. A wedding party. Incidentally one of the kinds of parties that were most affected by lockdown legislation. A cause of more than just groaning as we know too well.

But, moving on as they say:

We are in the Gospel of St John this morning and Jesus is at a wedding feast in Cana, near his home town of Nazareth. In John's account this takes place a few days after Jesus's baptism, and his calling of the first four of his disciples. We are told at the beginning of chapter 2 of John's Gospel that "On the third day – ie two days after the calling of Peter, Andrew, Philip and Nathaniel – there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee."

John also tells us that Mary, Jesus's mother was there and that Jesus and his new friends also attend. That is about as much context as John gives us, but over the centuries imaginations have worked hard at whose wedding it was and why Mary seems to have so much say in the proceedings. It's fascinating stuff. There is an early account that suggests that wedding is actually none other than that of the Gospel writer St John himself – that he is the nameless bridegroom - and that his mother Salome and Mary were sisters. And as a good aunt Mary is helping oversee the catering arrangements.

It is an attractive interpretation and explains why this is the story which begins John's account of Jesus's ministry and why there is such a strong eye-witness feeling to what we are told. Other interpretations suggest that Jesus and his friends were not exactly gate-crashers but that perhaps the host had expected one young man to come with Mary and not five, and hence when the wine runs out it is Mary who feels responsible, hence why she tells Jesus the problem – perhaps rather pointedly "They have no wine."

A brief personal aside at this point: Mary's words make my blood run cold. Not particularly that it is the wine that has run out but that anything has run out. Empty cups, plates or glasses. I think the worst words in English after lockdown and social – distancing must be "portion control". It is good and

proper on a daily basis to be restrained but at a wedding feast - then as now - the watchword should be PLENTY. Pushing the boat out - lovely phrase – making it very clear that the feast is a feast and not just any old day.

Certainly this was true in first century Palestine; for Jewish young couples the wedding feast would be the social highlight of their entire lives and the poorer the couple the greater the joy of this one rich glimpse of plenty. This is not about wealth but about joy.

So Mary's words would make everyone's blood run cold. Especially the host, the father of the bridegroom as well as everyone connected to the family. And this includes Jesus. Although his initial response to his mother asking him to do something seems as though it could be paraphrased as "Leave me alone mum". In fact Mary rightly judges that Jesus has a full understanding of what is needed. Less "Leave me alone" than – "Don't worry mum, I'm on it"

What is needed at that wedding in Cana? A session of teaching on restraint? No. A parable on not being attached to worldly pleasures? No. Teaching on why Jesus is the true wine? NO. What is needed is more wine. And what does Jesus do? He makes more wine.

This is such a simple point but such a deep one. Jesus rescues the human situation by providing what was actually needed in that human situation. He neither preaches nor interprets he "just" turns water into wine. Takes the water in the great jars used for washing and turns it all into wine. And not just "just enough and just good enough" but gallons of the stuff and the finest quality. The best has been kept until now. What happened at the wedding at Cana has embedded itself in secular tradition. Even now, though fewer people know the context, the idea of water turned into wine and saving the best until last rings true. It speaks deep and true into the human condition. The human condition that Jesus entered because that was what our human condition needed.

Over Christmas we have stood for the great Gospel reading of the first chapter of John. "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God and we have heard again that verse that speaks

of the one who inhabits eternity entering human history: AND THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US.

And to show us what this actually looks like – what the incarnation actually is – in the second chapter of his Gospel John shows us Jesus at a wedding. Jesus sitting eating and drinking and rejoicing with people like us. Dwelling among us. Jesus knowing and caring and loving and “getting it” “getting us” to just sort things out.

Oh my. It seems so small to say of the Word who created the universe “gets us” but that is what he showed at that wedding and that is what he shows us every high day and low day of our lives.

Countless interpretations have been suggested to decode this miracle – many very helpful ones – the new wine of salvation replaces the water of the law. But somehow however true this is it does not have the incarnational impact of empty glasses made full again.

We often overcomplicate and spiritualize our faith lives, by second guessing God. Guessing that if we come to him we will receive a lecture or correction when more often he wants to say “Cheers, well done, that was tough.” Sometimes it will be a more profound spiritual shift in our lives which we need him to guide us through, but mostly it will be some human trouble. Things that get us down, things that get in the way.

To use the story of the wedding at Cana it might be that sometimes even the water jars of our lives are empty. Or they are full not of water but some the toxins of life – nursed hurts, broken dreams and lost hopes. The one who became flesh and dwelt among us is the one who kept a party going in Cana. And he can take the stuff of our everyday fallen lives and make the finest wine – can fill empty glasses and empty days and lives.

The Epiphany is a time of wonder, of star-led seekers, of golden glimpses of glory and an invitation to the finest party of them all: our own lives lived in Him.