

## Sermon for Epiphany 2 Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> January 2016

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It has been an odd sort of week news-wise. The announcement of the death of David Bowie at 7am on Monday morning seems somehow to have set the tone and the tune for the rest of the week and eclipsed other news of the week too. Everyone seems to have a Bowie story or connection. Even our Archbishop Justin, on Radio 4's Today programme as the news came out, had a Bowie anecdote to share.

This other news included horrific details of the siege of Madaya in Syria, of attacks in Istanbul, Jakarta, Burkina Faso, and, of course, the reason why the Archbishop of Canterbury found himself in the Today studio first thing on Monday morning: The Anglican Communion's Primates' Meeting held this week. The agenda items were such that it is possible that Archbishop Justin might have been happier discussing his early taste in music than what the week ahead might hold.

The Anglican Communion was meeting at a time of considerable tension and danger of schism over the rights and wrongs of same-sex marriage. Put too briefly and too simply, the provinces of the USA and Canada are in favour of conducting such marriages. Other provinces, notably in Africa, are very much against this. In any event it has not been the agreed policy of the whole Anglican Communion and so the result of this week's deliberations has been neither schism nor unity, but, depending on your point of view, a weak compromise, a terrible injustice, or a wise pause for further reflection: The North American provinces are to be suspended from a role in the communion for three years.\*

Topical though this is, it is probably not something I would have chosen to raise here had it not been for the strong prompt of the readings given for today. They deal rather unavoidably with marriage and a wedding.

Our Old Testament reading describes God's love for his people even after their faithlessness in following other gods and forgetting all the wonderful deeds God has done on their behalf. Isaiah's prophetic vision is of a deep reconciliation and connection of God, Land and People. It is expressed in the most physical and intimate of language: Instead of the land and people being called "Forsaken" and "Desolate" "You shall be called My Delight is in Her and your land Married" The picture is fertility of the land and ownership, but more deeply of a sense of belonging together - God and His people - and of all that the word Married holds.

It is worth remembering that marriage is much older than Christianity. At least as old in some form, as any of the world religions. It is and has always been about putting some order into the potentially chaotic nature of human relationships. To some marriage might be just a legal formality, but to most the decision holds a spiritual

\* in fact, just USA.

dimension. My Delight is in You. You and not another. We two belonging together in some way beyond the physical fact. Married.

Jesus attends a marriage, or at least it seems the party after a wedding, in our Gospel today. I should declare an interest here as a “mother-of –the-bride-to-be” this year, the catering aspects of this passage make my blood run cold. The Wedding at Cana in John Chapter 2 occurs immediately after Jesus’s baptism and his calling of his first disciples. Jesus takes his disciples to the wedding with him, along with his mother. When the wine runs out Mary turns to her son expectantly. Jesus responds unhelpfully at first it seems, but his mother knows that all will be well, just because he is there.

Lots of interpretations are placed on the water turned into wine and saving the best until last. Many see echoes of the earlier baptism. John baptises with water, but Jesus will bring the baptism of the Spirit: the new wine of life in Christ. Others also see the fulfilment of the old covenant of God’s relationship with the Jewish people fulfilled in the new covenant of Christ’s saving love for the whole world. Water into wine.

Jesus though does not preach a sermon or tell a parable, he responds to what the situation requires. He can do this because he is God’s Son, but he can only do it because he is AT the wedding. Not above and beyond human experience but intimately connected to the grit and joy and sorrow of it all. No human need is beneath or beyond his attention and his love.

Jesus offers no theology or doctrine of marriage at Cana, just the blessing of full cups of finest wine. Jesus is where we are in the wrestling and the conflicts of human life and love. He comes to the wedding and turns water into wine. He comes to all our relationships and offers us the best that life can hold. Can we settle for water when he wants to give us this wine? Should we decide who should be offered water and who wine? Is what people *want* the same as what people *need*? Who is entitled to decide? These are hard and painful and pain-giving and pain-receiving questions. This is what our Archbishop and his fellow primates have been facing this week as well as those affected by such decisions. The challenge of the wedding at Cana is the challenge to become fully involved in the human story. Every human story. The things we can place only in God’s hands for no one else can hold them. And this is where all the decisions and indecisions made at Canterbury this week belong, and our prayers for those who bear the burden of leadership in our time.

For we know that we are not at the mercy of David Bowie’s “starman waiting in the sky” but in the hands of the living God who holds us and is with us in all the difficult and painful places in our lives and calls us not “forsaken” but beloved.

**Amen**