

Third Sunday of Epiphany 20.1.19

John 2.1-11, Isaiah 62.1-5

Rumour has it that some people give up alcohol in January in order to have a so called “dry” month. Knowing this congregation as I do I don’t imagine that is a particularly prevalent New year’s resolution here but if some of you have adopted this then I can only apologise for this morning’s gospel reading which must be very tempting for you with its talk of great partying with vast quantities of fine wine and I’m afraid I do rather dwell on this feature of the story.

At one level this story of turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana is quite straight forward it showed that Jesus was special because He could work miracles in much the way that a magician might, and at this time, particularly in the Middle East, that sort of person was not uncommon.

Growing up in a fairly strict Methodist family I didn’t really understand this story beyond the underlying magic. I didn’t know anything about wine, I didn’t know that people regularly drank it or that there was good and bad wine. Now many years later and at great cost I am, for better or for worse, very much more knowledgeable and understand the use of wine in the miracle story rather better.

John uses miracle stories as signs, signs with inner meaning. The eminent Welsh theologian C H Dodd called John’s gospel John’s Book of Signs. Not for John stories of shepherds, a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and wise men. Here right at the beginning of the book he is telling us that Jesus is the son of God and that he is here to reveal God’s nature to us – precisely the event that we are currently celebrating in this season of Epiphany.

John's readers would, unlike me, have immediately understood the imagery of wine. His Jewish readers would have associated wine with joy, Psalm 104 talks about , "wine to gladden the heart". The book of Ecclesiasticus considers that wine was created to make people rejoice and when drunk in moderation was, "equal to life for humans". Wine was also associated with the coming of God, both Amos and Joel talk of the mountains dripping sweet wine on the "day of the Lord" and Rabbinic teaching associated an abundance of wine with the messianic age.

Early Christian readers probably saw the quantity and quality of wine as illustrating God's generosity and the joy of the end of time. Pagan readers, particularly those who had come under Greek influence would have thought of Dionysos the God of wine and irrepressible new life about whom many miraculous stories of turning water into wine were told. Whatever the background wine was consistently considered to be good and associated with rejoicing.

This story of the wedding in Canaan is really about the beginning of a new era a new age, a messianic age, God reveals himself in a very different way. He reveals himself in human form and also as a God of love. But of course as always with John's writing there is so much else going on in this story. The passage begins with, "On the third day..." is that a reference right at the beginning of the book to the resurrection which is where the book climaxes. In verse 4 Jesus says, "My hour has not yet come", is he anticipating the passion and his crucifixion, or the first public acts of his ministry.

Then there is the rather sharp rebuke to his mother, “ what has that got to do with you and me”. Good to know that even in the Holy family there were tensions and disagreements but what was at the bottom of it? And then Mary ignores Jesus and effectively tells him to get on with it, again what are the family dynamics of that. The transformation of the water appears to have been done discreetly as the Steward didn’t know where the wine had come from. Jesus clearly didn’t want to make a splash at that time although he must have already done other strange and wonderful things otherwise Mary would’nt have asked him to intervene. All fascinating questions but to pursue them all this morning would be too much for Annie and indeed for the rest of you so I would like to focus on the wedding and its joyful celebration.

We like weddings and celebrate them with great joy and lavish festivities; because two people who are deeply in love are publicly proclaiming that and expressing their everlasting commitment one to the other. The love which we have for our partners is very special not least because we are prepared to make sacrifices for the ones we love. The words which we find on greetings cards can be grotesquely sentimental and sugary but a phrase like “There is nothing I would not do for you” does nonetheless hint at the depth of commitment in true love.

In this story we are invited to see Christ being a party to a marriage, he is seen as the bridegroom being presented to his Church, loving his people like a partner. It can be difficult to fully understand and articulate both the love which God has for us, and our love for him in return, but we get a clue when we think about the type of feelings and commitment which we have to those whom we love most dearly.

This morning's reading from Isaiah recalls the joy of God in his people and perhaps is not entirely typical of the Old Testament where God is so often characterised as a God of Judgement. But in the new age recorded in the Gospels God is characterised by his unconditional love for his people hence the extravagant celebrations at the wedding and make no mistake it was lively - it is estimated that Jesus produced more than 100 gallons of wine, not surprisingly there is an allusion to the guests over indulging. But that's what we do when we are happy and have something to celebrate. In our worship we can tend to over emphasise the sack cloth and ashes of our faith at the expense of celebrating the love of God with joy and abandon.

I'm sure that there will be celebrating in Annie's home today after her baptism. It will rightly be a celebration of her arrival into the family but I hope that it will also be a celebration of the love of God for her, a love which she will come ever closer to in her Baptism.

I have already mentioned the extent to which this story is packed with meaning and one commentator considers it to summarise the whole of the Christian message. I have focused today on love which clearly is central to the Christian message, but hidden away in the text, perhaps lost a bit in the excitement, are words by Mary addressed to the servants. Words which are a great motto for Annie as she begins her journey of faith and words which can guide and support us in our continuing journeys of faith. Those words are, "Do whatever he tells you."

And what could be more natural than that as it's a prime characteristic of love that we try to please our loved ones.

Remembering always of course to do so with joy and celebration.....and wine!.

