

Epiphany 3 Sunday 24th January

Collect

Almighty God, whose Son revealed in signs and miracles
the wonder of your saving presence:
renew your people with your heavenly grace,
and in all our weakness sustain us by your mighty power;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

First Reading Isaiah Chapter 62:1-5

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet,
till her vindication shines out like the dawn,
her salvation like a blazing torch.
²The nations will see your vindication,
and all kings your glory;
you will be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.
³You will be a crown of splendour in the LORD's hand,
a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
⁴No longer will they call you Deserted,
or name your land Desolate.
But you will be called Hephzibah,^[a]
and your land Beulah;^[b]
for the LORD will take delight in you,
and your land will be married.
⁵As a young man marries a young woman,
so will your Builder marry you;
as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you.

Second Reading Revelation 19:6-10

⁶Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

'Hallelujah!
For our Lord God Almighty reigns.
⁷Let us rejoice and be glad
and give him glory!
For the wedding of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready.
⁸Fine linen, bright and clean,
was given her to wear.'

(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people.) ⁹Then the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!' And he added, 'These are the true words of God.' ¹⁰At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, 'Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers and sisters who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For it is the Spirit of prophecy who bears testimony to Jesus.'

Gospel Reading John 2:1-11

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." "Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied, "My time has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to

drink; but you have saved the best till now." This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.

Reflections

Some years ago I was at an Alpha Supper. If you haven't been to one, the idea is that you can explore issues of faith whilst enjoying a tasty meal and maybe some wine too. Whilst we were dining, the conversation came round to 'what question would you ask Jesus if he were to walk through the door right now?' My fellow diners came up with all the old chestnuts – why is there so much suffering in the world? Why does God allow wars? Etc etc – all far too worthy in my opinion for the context. Given we were sat at a table eating and drinking, my question to Jesus would have been 'red, white or water so you can make your own?'

The passage from John's Gospel today has Jesus down as the best party guest EVER! It is one which causes some consternation, especially amongst teetotalers, but in the context of the day, wine was a central part of Mediterranean culture. Here Jesus makes wine, lots of it. And it is unnecessarily good wine. Everyone has been celebrating for some time and they would not have noticed if Jesus had produced some generic plonk from the EU wine lake – but the vintage Jesus provides is of the highest quality – Jesus gives the guests Chateauneuf du Pape, or maybe even a Chateau Rothschild. It is almost over the top and could easily be criticised as wasteful.

This story appears in John's gospel and nowhere else. John's Gospel is different to the other three Gospels. John's carefully chosen accounts and even more carefully chosen words invite the reader to reflect deeply on the meaning of what is written. So let's explore this a little more.

This is the first recorded miracle and belongs to the category we call 'nature miracles' – Jesus does something similar later on with bread and fishes - two stories of miraculous provision that go beyond fulfilling the basic need. John wants his readers to read beyond the story. What is going on here? Clues that this is John's intention come in verse 11 with the words *glory*, *signs* and *faith*. Another clue is in the use of the words '*Jesus' hour*' – all words and phrases that are repeated throughout the Gospel and which point towards the Passion narrative. John WANTS us to read the story and think about the symbolism it contains.

The placing of the story at the beginning of Jesus ministry marks it as an inaugural event. It sets the scene for the pattern of Jesus teaching and shows us a God who delights in generosity. The incident is a vivid enactment of the good things that God has to offer.

In the Old Testament, the abundance of good wine symbolises the joyous arrival of God's new age. A miraculous supply of wine was a motif common in ancient Greek folklore and was a sign of the presence of God. The story is not just an account of the first miracle, but symbolises the arrival of a new age, a redefining of the relationship between humanity and God through Jesus. Wine also symbolised rootedness – you can't make wine if you are nomadic. Vines need tending, wine needs time to ferment and mature. When you are growing vines for wine, you are settled and rooted. You are in a place of home. The image of the vine is one that occurs throughout the Gospels.

John goes into great detail about the receptacles – 6 stone jars each capable of holding between 20 and 30 gallons of wine 29" x 18", massive, heavy and even heavier when full – over 100kg of wine alone in each jar. The stone is significant – the jars are for purification and needed to be stone. Earthenware jars risk absorbing impurities so the water they contain may not be ritually pure. John is careful to point out the intended purpose for the jars. But these jars appear to be empty – if they were already holding water for purification, there would have been no need for Jesus to instruct the servant to fill the jars. John again invites us to ponder – the jars of ritual are empty. How often in the Old Testament does God say 'I don't want your rituals and sacrifices – I want a pure heart and for you to do what's right'? Jesus fills the jars with wine - something new. The old forms are given a new content by Jesus, the stone jars needed for ritual are repurposed to contain the elements of celebration.

The story speaks of joy, celebration, surprise and delight. The wine is attributed to the bridegroom in the story, but we know where it has really come from – and is not Jesus also referred to as the bridegroom of the church?

In the past, the Christian life has sometimes been seen as one of solemnity and restriction. We all know the stories of the Interregnum after the Civil War when the joy of the Christian faith was sucked out of the church by the protestant hierarchy. That didn't last long, but it resurfaced in Victorian times with changes to the style of worship in our churches. This story shows that the dwelling of God with humanity is something real, something to celebrate. God himself in Christ celebrates it at this marriage feast, which can be seen as hinting at the great marriage feast of the lamb spoken of in the book of Revelation. This dwelling with humanity, this 'Incarnation' is something we recall when we celebrate communion, something that is becoming a distant memory for us at present. It seems almost incongruous to be reflecting on the joy of weddings and Jesus the wedding guest at the moment, but as the Book of Revelation points out, the Church is the Bride of Christ. Though we cannot meet together in person at the moment, we are still the Church and Christ still loves us and cares for us as the bridegroom loves and cares for his bride.