

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Third Sunday of Epiphany – 24th January 2021

Christine Portman - Reader

I wonder if during the first lockdown you suddenly found dozens of little videos, cartoons and jokes popping up on your devices? I certainly did! In WhatsApp groups and family blogs, people wanted to lift the spirits of friends and relations, thrust as we were into a strange and unnerving situation. One video was sent to me several times – so perhaps you've seen it too. It opens as a young father reads a bedtime story to his young son and begins: *It was a world of waste and wonder, of poverty and plenty. Back before we understood why hindsight's 2020.* He goes on to describe this world - the world we now live in, touching on issues we're all too familiar with – the negative impacts of globalization, the growing gap between rich and poor, climate change and pollution threatening the Earth. But at the end, rather like those reassuring John Lewis Christmas ads, there's a happy ending. The father tells his son that after a great virus infected the world, people had a change of heart. They began to work for a cleaner and fairer future in which there was just sharing of Earth's blessings. The story he tells is called *The Great Realisation*.

How many times have I read or heard over the past year, "I hope the world doesn't simply return to what we had before"? Thanks to David Attenborough and others, millions of us now understand the consequences of failing to change our human behaviour – consequences for all life that shares this 'perfect planet'. People are anxious for the future, especially the young. We need to change – and transformation is at the heart of today's gospel. Under Jesus' direction, fundamental change is possible. Jars of water become not simply wine – but the very best wine ever tasted – wine that is to be tasted *now*.

Mary, probably part of the host family is deeply embarrassed: the wedding wine is running out, but Jesus' first response to his mother seems pretty harsh: *Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?* It's as though he's marking a break between

them. Three days after his baptism Jesus now has a new family gathered around him. His mission is beginning but he knows that as yet, his *hour has not yet come*. What follows is a key moment in the gospel. When John writes that this is the first of the *signs* performed by Jesus, the Greek word he uses doesn't only signify first in order of sequence, it also means *key*. This first sign or σημεῖον - sémeion is a pointer which helps us to unlock the meaning of Jesus' being. It leads us, like the first disciples, to put our trust in him.

His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you'. Even before the sign, Mary has complete faith in her son – but the others need to witness the transformation in order to believe. *Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.* John's gospel reveals the true nature of Jesus Christ in order to bring us to faith. Revealing himself as the Son of God, Jesus orders the servants to fill six large water jars *to the brim*. These jars are the type used for Jewish purification rituals – but they are not quite full. Jesus wants them to be filled to overflowing. It must have seemed a bizarre request: what could he be intending?

For a very long time now, in the more affluent and peaceful parts of the world, many of us have enjoyed a standard of life which seems to be overflowing. The older ones among us may have personally experienced the horrors of war, but those of us who have enjoyed a peaceful and prosperous life have perhaps grown used to thinking of ourselves as the ones in control. Most people have enough to eat and a roof over their heads; many of us have more than we need. Well-organised states have provided health care systems and free education. We have thought our democracies strong and able to protect our freedoms.

Recent events have shaken some of those “certainties”. As people increasingly choose their personal news sources, clever algorithms top up their feeds with ever more material that seems to suit their profiles. Conspiracy theories gain ground and consensus in our societies grows weaker. As the fall-out from the siege of the US Capitol continues to reverberate across the world, we have seen the powerful effects of a Big Lie. But maybe the biggest lie under which we have been living is that we are in control. We are not.

The power that created and sustains our universe is none other than God and Jesus manifests that power at the wedding. God's laws rule, and when they are broken,

suffering follows, as day follows night. We inhabit a moral universe. In the chapter that follows this first sign we're introduced to Nicodemus, not only a Pharisee steeped in the scriptures, but a very important man, a member of the ruling council. He's heard about Jesus and is troubled, so he visits him secretly, by night. Acknowledging him as *Rabbi*, he says: *we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.* Jesus senses the unstated question and seems to give an oblique answer: *Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.* Transformation, as shown at Cana, is the key to the kingdom. In *Water into Wine*, his book on John's Gospel, Stephen Verney, explains:

This key sign tells us that what Jesus brings about is transformation. Water is transformed – but water is the raw material of our human nature. It is this raw material of human nature that is to be transformed, and this will be done not by crushing it and abolishing it but by filling it up to the full, and then exposing it to the transforming power of a new order. In that new order, as part of a new pattern around a new centre, our destiny will be fulfilled. The self will become the true Self. Ego-centricity will be transformed into Love.

We are all as Muriel's email tag reminds *On the Journey*. Being shown that we must transform sounds radical. It is! For some people, like Paul on the road to Damascus, fundamental change can happen in a flash, but for most of us it's often more a case of three steps forward, two steps back as we struggle to leave the selfish self behind. But as we do, little by little, God fills up the space we make and opens our eyes to what he wants us to do in this life. The words of a famous hymn can help our daily prayer:

*May the mind of Christ, my Saviour,
Live in me from day to day,
By His love and power controlling
All I do and say.*

St Teresa of Avila famously taught: *Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

The transformation of our world is possible, and it will happen through individuals like you or me. It is never too late for change. With God all things are possible!

Amen