

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Second Sunday of Epiphany

16th January 2022

All Saints' Marseille

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It has been suggested that the whole of the Gospel is contained in that story. That's quite a claim. What is it about the wedding at Cana, the first of the so-called 'signs' recorded in John's Gospel, that brings us back to it so often?

The 'signs' in the Fourth Gospel are a series of events that point beyond themselves, from which the writer wants us to understand the significance of Jesus. Here, right at the beginning of his ministry, we are given a hint of how the story will end. This is John's 'manifesto', the programmatic story that says what his whole Gospel will be about. The clue lies in the first few words: 'On the third day'. This is a story about resurrection.

It's interesting how the Lectionary pairs the wedding at Cana with our Old Testament reading from the Book of Isaiah. It set me thinking about the things John might be pointing towards in his 'sign' - some apparent, some less so. For example, have you ever noticed how often in the Bible people are given a second chance? This week in Morning Prayer we heard the story of Cain who, after murdering his brother Abel, is spared by God. Then there is Jacob who, having tricked his father into giving him the blessing which his brother Esau should have

received, tries to run away. But he encounters God in the wilderness and goes on to become the ancestor of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob's favourite son Joseph is sold by his jealous brothers and taken to Egypt as a slave, but later becomes Pharaoh's principal adviser and the saviour of his own family.

Fast forward to the Gospels, where we find Jesus constantly giving those he meets a second chance. Often they are ostracised or marginalised, causing the religious authorities to criticise Jesus for associating with the wrong sort of people. And at the climax of John's Gospel we find Peter, having denied Jesus three times, being rehabilitated after the Resurrection by the threefold question 'Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me?', and going on to become the founder of the church. None of these people are what you might call reliable in a conventional sense. Yet God uses them for good, their story ending in a way that looked impossible when they were at their lowest ebb.

The giving of a second chance is often true of events in the Bible too. Our reading from Isaiah concerns the event that dominated all others in the Old Testament: the exile of the people of ancient Israel to Babylon some six hundred years before Christ. Much of the Old Testament was written during the exile by a people recalling their central narratives, exploring their identity and asking themselves what might have caused the current crisis, which they perceived was somehow linked to a drifting away from the purposes of God. The last chapters of Isaiah are about the return from exile. So our reading this morning represents God's word of encouragement to a people learning how to start over again. It's a classic 'second chance' reading:

‘... you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the Lord will give.
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, ...
You shall no more be termed Forsaken ...

Those words have a timeless resonance. Think of the people you know who have been given a second chance, after coming to terms with a disaster. Think of the moments you have felt the warmth of rehabilitation after a time of wilderness. ‘You shall no more be termed Forsaken.’

That message lies too at the heart of the New Testament. We all know, deep down, that if any of us had the light shone on our whole lives we wouldn’t come out perfectly. We know this, but we also know that we live in a very judgmental world, which has only increased with pressure from social, national and international media. People make mistakes all the time and are often punished for it. But it is never the end of their story. In the end, the Christian Gospel is much more about forgiveness than it is about never putting a foot wrong. That’s why one of the best known parables is that of the Prodigal child. ‘You shall be called by a new name ... you shall no longer be termed Forsaken, but you shall be called ‘My Delight Is in [You]’. That’s not a fashionable response. But it is the Gospel.

In the Church of England, a number of churches are currently signing up to become what is known as a ‘second chance church’ – one where those newly released from prison will find support as they readjust to life in the community. One of the people behind this initiative is the Reverend Jonathan Aitken, a fellow curate of mine at the church where we both served in London. He suffered a very public fall from grace in the 1990s when, as a former Cabinet minister, he was jailed for perjury. But his response to prison was an extraordinary

deepening of faith, as a result of which he is now ordained, ministering as a chaplain at one of the toughest jails in the country. That is not a fashionable response. But it is the Gospel. The whole Church of which we are all part, founded by St Peter after his own rehabilitation, is a second chance church.

What does all this have to do with the wedding at Cana? Why is this story so central to John's understanding of the good news? At a simple level, it's a story we can all relate to. Hands up anyone who doesn't over-cater when they have guests coming. Running out of wine is something we would all feel embarrassed about. In first century Palestine it would have been more dramatic – an issue of shame in a culture where honour and shame mattered much more than they do now. So, at a straightforward level, Jesus is offering this family a second chance, bringing them back from the precipice of shame.

But the symbolism in this story shows how John believes something much deeper is also going on. There is something about the effect Jesus has on people and situations, something so profound that only the language of metaphor will do to convey it. Something divine is going on, something that is revealing the very heart of God. This story is full of symbols – not least water, wine and a wedding.

Water. There are six stone water jars used for ritual purification - the number of incompleteness (in contrast to seven, the number of perfection). The jars are a sign that God is doing a new thing from within the old.

Wine. In Jewish sacred writing, abundant quantities of wine referred to the promised restoration of Israel. John implies that, in the new relationship with God brought about by Jesus, restoration is already happening and joy will overflow.

A wedding. The 'wedding feast', too, traditionally pointed to the messianic age, of God 'marrying' his people in an eternal covenant. The many references to wedding feasts in the Gospels are about that restored relationship. And, at the end of the Book of the Revelation, heaven is referred to as the wedding feast of the Lamb, the final union of Christ and the community he came to build. So the wedding at Cana points forward to the heavenly banquet when all will be gathered up into God.

The pattern John discerned is that, when wine runs out and Jesus is there, something is transformed. It's part of a pattern seen throughout the Scriptures, where time and again second chances are given. Even when everything seems lost, when the person you have given up everything to follow is executed as a common criminal after a show trial, abandoned by his friends. It is then that God acts. For, as we noted at the beginning, this is a story that took place 'on the third day'. It is about resurrection, a foretaste of heaven. And what is heaven? Heaven is where God saves the best wine until last.

Amen.