

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Third Sunday of Epiphany – 24th January 2021

All Saints' Marseille

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I think I only began to understand the significance of this story when someone pointed out to me how much came out of the water jars: between 800 and 1200 bottles of fine wine. That was quite a lot to top up the supply at a village wedding. The story comes right at the beginning of John's account of Jesus's ministry. John calls it a 'sign', something that points beyond itself. A revealing of the significance of Jesus, which is why it is set as a reading for the season of Epiphany.

A village wedding is a happy event, but something has gone wrong. They have run out of wine. That would be embarrassing on any social occasion, but in a culture where shame and honour mattered much more than in our own, it would have been something of a disaster for the hosts. It's a story full of vivid human detail, not least the conversation between Jesus and his mother. His words may sound rather harsh when translated into English: 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' The word 'Woman' is actually less harsh in the original Greek, and it can be spoken with tenderness – we think of the next time we hear it from Jesus's lips, as he hangs on the cross: 'Woman, behold your son.' For that is the only other moment

when we meet Jesus's mother in the Fourth Gospel. And so Jesus's words at the wedding of Cana already point ahead to the crucifixion, of which he says just before it takes place: 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son'. For John, the crucifixion is the ultimate moment when heaven and earth meet. 'Signs' like the wedding at Cana point ahead to it.

But for now we are in the wedding feast, and Jesus is speaking to his mother. I like the snippets of conversation that we are given in the Gospels, for they offer us an insight into Jesus's personality, his humanity. Having known him for thirty years, his mother knows how to handle her son. Even though he is protesting, she tells the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' She knows he will intervene to help, and she is right. This brief exchange reminds us of the story Jesus himself tells in Matthew's Gospel account, about two sons who are asked by their father to go and work in his vineyard. One son says no, but later changes his mind and goes. The other says yes but doesn't go. Jesus teaches that it is the first of the sons who does the will of his father. One wonders if it was a pattern of response familiar to him. It seems to have been familiar to his mother in the conversation at Cana.

In addition to the human detail, this story is full of symbols, which John is keen for his hearers to pick up. In the Old Testament, the messianic age was often referred to in terms of a wedding feast, of God 'marrying' his people in an eternal covenant. The references to wedding feasts throughout the Gospels are about that restored relationship. And at the end of the Book of the Revelation (which is part of the same tradition as the Fourth Gospel) heaven is referred to as the wedding feast of the Lamb, the final union of Christ and the community he had come to build, which we call the Church. So the wedding at Cana points

forward too to the heavenly banquet when all will be gathered up into God, a foretaste of which we are promised each time we meet to celebrate the Eucharist.

People have found all sorts of significance in the details of this Gospel story. There are six stone water jars - the number of incompleteness, in contrast to seven, the number of perfection. The water jars were there to provide ritual purity for the wedding guests – water for washing their hands and their feet. The jars are a sign that God is doing a new thing from within the old. Jesus often takes an existing religious practice and transforms into something new – the Passover feast becomes our Holy Communion.

The amount of the wine which, following Jesus's intervention, pours out of the water jars is superabundant, both in quality and quantity. In the prophecies of the Old Testament, large quantities of wine are used to refer to the promised restoration of the people of God: 'The mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it' (Amos 9.13). John's message is that, in the new relationship with God brought about by Jesus, restoration is already happening.

And, as Christians, we cannot fail to hear the significance of the words with which the story begins: 'on the third day'. This is a story about the new relationship between God and humanity - the new covenant, the new union of God in Christ with his people, which begins with the Resurrection 'on the third day'.

Above all, this is a story about the difference that Jesus makes: a story about transformation. The water made wine is the change effected by his touch on our lives. And it affects us both as individuals and when we gather together as

his Church. This week is the Week of prayer for Christian unity, when despite our differences we focus on what unites us more than what divides us: one faith, one Church, one Lord.

Christ helps each of us to become the person God meant us to be. It's what his ministry was about. Turning the water of life into the wine of eternal life. It's important for us to remember this when we are under pressure, when we feel our resources are running dry. Especially, perhaps, in a time of pandemic.

A former Archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Gordon Lang, noted that the life of faith is about learning to make water into wine. He wrote:

'At Cana the wine did not simply come: the water became it. That is the divine method. When Christ came, he did not come in a new order of being: he came in flesh, as a human being. It was this real and actual human nature that he made divine. We are to follow that divine method. We are to take the water of life as we find it, and convert it into wine.'¹

Writing a century later, Bishop John V Taylor expressed this insight in slightly different terms:

'If God is to be of any use to you or me, he has to be a God who stands gently alongside you, and says, 'Where shall we go from here? What shall we make of it?' You can't undo what has made you what you are. You can't undo history. But from this moment, with God you can look forward and say, 'What shall we make of this?' ... It is good to remember that the child born at Bethlehem [, whose Epiphany we celebrate in this season,]

¹ *The Miracles of Jesus as the Way of Life* (1901)

reminds us that God says, 'Let's take it from here, and whatever comes, let's see what we can make of it.'²

So as we look towards the future at this daunting time, let's try thinking in those terms: 'What are we going to make of this?' And try saying to ourselves in reply: 'We are going to make water into wine.'

It's the difference Christ made, and makes still.

Amen.

² The Easter God (2003)