

John 2: 1-11

The CofE is sometimes criticised for moving too slowly. But it can't be accused of that in our liturgy at this time of year! Indeed, we move rather fast in that less than a month ago we were welcoming the Christ child into the world at Christmas. Then we moved into Epiphany where we have not one but three epiphanies or manifestations. First, the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles with the visit of the magi / three kings, when Jesus would have been no more than two years old. Then last week the baptism of Christ, the manifestation that Jesus was God's Son, at the start of His adult ministry. And today, the wedding in Cana, by which time He had gathered His disciples, and where He performed the first of His seven signs thereby manifesting His glory. From baby to mature adult in less than a month!

In two weeks' time, however, just to confuse this chronological progression, we are back to the presentation of Christ in the Temple as a baby! No need to make things too logical ...!

But today we focus on the third of the epiphanies, the manifestation of Jesus's glory through the turning of water into wine at the wedding in Cana. A few initial reflections on this before we get into the meat (to mix metaphors [wine/meat – get it? And what might the vegetarian equivalent of meat be, I wonder?]) of what I want to concentrate on.

First, following from what Mike spoke about last week, when he noted that John the Baptist got things both right and wrong, we might wonder what he would have made of this episode of Jesus turning water into wine. You'll probably recall that John, in prison, when he heard what Jesus was doing, sent disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" In other words, he wasn't quite sure Jesus was living up to his expectations of what the Messiah should be all about. And Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." (Matt. 11: 2-6).

John was expecting judgement – "the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" he had said (Matt. 3: 12), and here was Jesus restoring things, making all manner of things good. Perhaps Jesus's words, that they are blessed who do not stumble on his account, was directed particularly at John.

But then we might wonder what John would have made of it all if Jesus had added, "And you should have seen the miracle that I did at the wedding in Cana! 700 bottles of the best quality wine you might never have tasted! Oh the joy of it all (and the hangovers)!" There was a degree of scandal in Jesus's first sign. So perhaps for us a question is whether we are scandalised or overjoyed at the abundant, generous, fun-loving God Jesus manifests to us?

A second reflection is what the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus might have been. She clearly felt some responsibility for the practicalities of the wedding, including that the wine was about to run out. But there is also the point that here is a case of 'mother knows best'; she seems

to push Jesus beyond where He wanted to go: “My hour has not yet come” Jesus retorts. But do we sometimes need to take God on, as Mary did, when we can clearly see things that need to be done, and He seems not to be willing to do anything about it? How do we pray in those kinds of situations?

And a final reflection: where is the bride in this story? The bridegroom gets a mention, but the bride isn’t mentioned at all even though she must have been there, and was pretty fundamental to the whole event. And that might raise a question for us about who we might not notice, or who we might write out of our script.

But on to the meat. I want us to view this event through the eyes of one of the servants, because I think doing that opens the story up quite helpfully for us. So, imagine being one of the servants at the wedding. It’s, perhaps, a common enough part of your work; you’re familiar with how weddings work and what to expect.

So, perhaps you’re one of the first to notice that the wine is getting a bit low, and if they go on drinking at this rate it will have all gone well before the end. Perhaps, knowing something of Mary’s role, you tip her off. And then you watch as she approaches Jesus, and maybe you can’t quite hear the conversation but it’s pretty obvious that there’s a bit of an altercation going on here.

And then Mary comes over to you and says, “Do whatever he tells you.” OK, that’s a clear enough instruction, and so when Jesus tells you to fill the six stone jars with water you do it, taking them out to the well and even filling them right to the brim. And, at the same time, you’re thinking, “What good is this? What’s he up to?” But yours is not to question why.

But then He says, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” Oh, come on, is this some sort of joke? But worse, what if the chief steward thinks you’re to blame for trying this on? But “Do whatever he tells you” is the instruction, so perhaps reluctantly, perhaps fearing the worst, you do as you’re told, take a cup, fill it from one of the water jars, and take it to the chief steward.

The tension mounts, the chief steward looks quizzically at you – “What’s this?” And then he lifts the cup to his lips, and you wait. And then he smiles! And has another taste just to be sure! And then he calls over the bridegroom, and asks him why he’s held back the good wine until now.

And you are ... astonished! Things like this don’t happen. Water, and you know it was water only a few moments ago, doesn’t suddenly become wine, and yet ... apparently it does when this fellow Jesus says so. But surely not all six stone water jars, all full to the brim, surely only one of them which would be more than enough for the remainder of the wedding. But no, as Winnie the Pooh established in relation to honey, it’s wine right down to the bottom of each of the six jars.

Wow! You are astonished! But for now the job is just to serve the guests with this new wine, and watch the wonder on their faces as they taste it, and the joy when they realise not only how good it is but that there’s pretty much an unlimited supply. The party goes on, and how!

But afterwards, perhaps over the following few days, you reflect again on that incredible, tense moment when the chief steward took his first sip. And you wonder how the water had become wine. And perhaps you wonder whether, if a transformation such as this could take place in the midst of your everyday existence, as you go about your everyday work, whether other such transformations might be possible. And you wonder at the joy that resulted at the wedding party, and whether such joy could also break out in the middle of the ordinary, at other times and places. And you wonder who this Jesus really is, and wonder whether you should always do whatever He tells you.

Our Collect this morning bears repetition at this point: "Almighty God, in Christ you make all things new: transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your heavenly glory."

And, I want to end, drawing together all three epiphanies over the last three Sundays, with some words which Jane will also use as a preface to the blessing at the end of our service. In this time of epiphanies, and beyond it:

*May God the Father, who led the wise men by the shining of a star to find the Christ, the Light from light, lead you also in your pilgrimage to find the Lord. Amen.*

*May God the Holy Spirit, who came upon the beloved Son at his baptism in the river Jordan, pour out his gifts on you who have come to the waters of new birth. Amen.*

*May God the Son, who turned water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana, transform your lives and make glad your hearts. Amen.*