

17th January 2016

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: **134** **“Christ whose glory fills the skies”**
 685 **“In Christ there is no east or west”**
 449 **“Lord of creation, to you be all praise”**
 443 **“Come, let us sing of a wonderful love”**

READINGS: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11
 John 2:1-11

“A TASTE OF NEW WINE”

In our intercessions at the 9.45am service last week we prayed for the Anglican Church as it faced very serious discussions. Archbishop Justin Welby had gathered heads of Anglican Churches from around the world together in Canterbury. They were in conference all last week to try to find a way of living in fellowship together despite very deep differences in attitude to the issue of homosexuality. Time will tell whether the way they have decided to go is helpful.

I am not beginning my sermon in this way because I want to talk about Christian attitudes to different sexual orientations - that is not best done in a sermon format anyway. I have begun in this way because at the heart of these differing attitudes in the Anglican Church is the way in which the Bible is read, used and understood.

And this fact should alert us or remind us that the Bible is a complex book, inspired by God but written by many different people, in different contexts over thousands of years. In fact the Bible is more a library than a book – a library which contains history, poetry, letters, stories, and parables – a whole range of different types of literature.

The Books of the Old Testament are the Jewish or Hebrew Scriptures. The New Testament books were written in the period after the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Even the four Gospels present a very varied picture of Jesus, his life and ministry and were written later than the letters of St. Paul.

Our reading for today comes from the Gospel of John, written some 70 years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection. It is a Gospel that is very different from those of Matthew, Mark and Luke. There is no direct account of Jesus' birth in John just that wonderful (but difficult) passage, 2 in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” There are no events called ‘miracles’ in John's Gospel – just happenings that John calls ‘signs’. John's Gospel presents the life and ministry of Jesus in a different and even puzzling way. The richness of the Gospel presents a problem for us for there is often a relatively simple surface story and then a wealth of deeper meaning.

The story of the wedding at Cana, which we heard earlier, is unique to the Gospel of John and on the surface it is a simple story – Jesus attends a wedding, the wine is in

danger of running out, Mary asks Jesus to help out and rescue the situation and the result is that enormous amounts of wine appear in six stone jars.

This story is, on this level, problematic for many Christians including many Methodists, who see alcohol as something harmful and to be avoided. Here we have a story of Jesus – the wine purveyor, creating not just a few bottles of wine but gallons upon gallons and good quality stuff, too. This is not a miracle or sign like other miracles – this is a miracle of creating vast amounts of wine.

Some churches and some preachers dodge this section of John's Gospel because they cannot square Jesus' creation of large quantities of wine with their own attitudes to wine and spirits. They/we are then reading the Bible out of our own context rather than John's context in first century Palestine.

Let us look at the context of this passage and then at the different levels of meaning that it offers us.

This story takes place at Cana in Galilee near Nazareth just a few days after Jesus has called his first disciples – including Nathanael whose home was in Can. Mary's, Jesus's mother was clearly an insider at this wedding – she had authority to give instructions to the servants.

There are some other books, written around the same time as John's Gospel, but not included in the Bible, that say that the bridegroom was actually John himself, whose mother Salome was the sister of Mary. Whether that tradition is true or not we certainly have a vivid eyewitness account of this wedding.

Weddings in the Middle East then, as there and in many places even now, are very significant occasions – something in which the whole community participates for a whole week. Food and drink are essential to the wedding festivities. Hospitality was and still is a sacred duty. A rabbinic saying puts it like this – 'without wine there is no joy.'

For wine to run out on such an occasion was a social disaster – a terrible beginning to a couple's married life which would haunt them for a long time. Mary is desperate – she sees the wine running out and so she asks Jesus for help. He got the servants to fill huge jars with water and when they did they found it was wine, gallons of wonderful wine. The social disaster had been averted. Most of the guests probably had no idea what had happened but the disciples were aware. We see that in the last line of our reading, "Jesus did this, the first of his signs and revealed his glory and his disciples believed him. This was the first occasion for Jesus to show his glory – his God-centredness and for the disciples to see a glimpse of who he was – not just through words but action.

Now to the deeper meaning of this story – a deeper meaning that would speak to those who understood the Old Testament and who were living after the death and resurrection of Jesus as part of the Early Church.

The passage begins with the phrase, “on the third day there was a wedding” – that is the third day since Jesus called his disciples. In those three days the disciples had gone from laying aside their own ambitions to follow Jesus to being present with him at a wedding feast. For Jesus’ followers his rising ‘on the third day’ after his crucifixion took them from despair to joy. In this way John begins his Gospel with references to its climax – right at the outset there are signposts to the end.

Then what about those six stone jars – it was not that they were the only containers handily around. They have significance. They usually contained water for Jewish purification rites but now, with Jesus’ intervention the water becomes wine. For those with eyes to see here was God doing a new thing from within the old Jewish system – water into wine, regulation into grace. And that grace was so abundant that it could never run out – 6 jars at 25 gallons each – 150 gallons in total or a 1000 bottles of wine. This shows the superabundance of grace being offered by God through Jesus. As Jesus is recorded as saying in John 10:10 ‘I have come that you might have life in all its fullness, abundant life.’

And then there is Mary. This is the only time in John’s Gospel that she is recorded as taking part in Jesus’ life until the crucifixion. On both occasions Jesus calls her by the Aramaic word which is translated in English as ‘woman’ – again here we have a signpost to the end right at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Surely that is also the relevance of the strange reference to ‘my time has not yet come.’

John’s Gospel is like a treasure hunt, full of cryptic clues and this story of the wedding at Cana is just the first clue, the first sign. This is a story of transformation – yes, from water to wine but far more deeply about the transformation of our lives as we follow Jesus. Equally this wedding feast at Cana hints of the heavenly banquet prepared for all who follow Christ as promised in the Book of Revelation and as spoken each time in the Communion Service.

This is a story about the grace of God available to all who follow Jesus, all who open their life to him, share their problems with him and give themselves willingly to walk his path. This story is about joy, community, enjoyment - the abundance of God’s kingdom.

Søren Kirkegaard, the 19th century Danish philosopher wrote, “ Christ turned water into wine but the Church has succeeded in doing something even more difficult, it has turned wine into water.”

It is as if we so often turn the grace of God in Christ back into law and regulation and miss completely the joy of the ‘wine’ and of the ‘wedding feast’ as we become preoccupied with the potentially negative effects of alcohol and with living by rules rather than grace.

But this story also has a message for wider society, so-called secular society, where people so often live on the surface, living for the moment, living for one’s own

gratification – trying to enliven existence with novelty and excitement but with no true depth of meaning.

Jesus came that we might have life – meaningful life, purposeful life, life in all its abundance. That's why he was able to feed 5000 on the hillside and have 12 baskets left over. That is why he created so much wine that the whole village of Cana could feast for a week. That is what can happen to us if we listen to Jesus, heed his words and walk with him into the Kingdom of God. Dare we accept the invitation to this wedding and allow ourselves to be changed from water to wine, from the persons we think we are into the cherished children of God? Amen