

## 16 January 2022; Epiphany 2

**Isaiah 62: 1-5; Psalm 36: 5-10; I Corinthians 12: 1-11;  
John 2: 1-11**

### 1. **Avoiding the hum drum**

Just for a moment, imagine you are a wedding guest at Cana. A wedding is a welcome distraction from a pretty hard life, and this is a good wedding. The whole community is there, and half way through the proceedings, some really excellent new wine is produced. Time to worry tomorrow about your debts, the olive harvest, your sick mother-in-law and your son who has joined the zealots protesting about the Roman occupation.

Perhaps you have no children or debts but have outlived your fellows: life seems to have lost its point, but you can forget that for a while at the wedding. For now, all is forgotten in the excuse for a good party. You are feeling less stressed than for some time, and surely tonight you will sleep well for a change. All right, so tomorrow will be no different – the worries or the loneliness will return. But for now, life is good for a while.

Does any of that sound familiar? Different as life may be these days from that of a village community in Palestine 2000 years ago, life can still be pretty difficult or hard, even more so in the current situation when we have all had nearly 2 years of

anxiety about the pandemic on top of everyday worries or compounding them.. And to deal with it, people still welcome or even seek distractions. It may be the TV or other forms of entertainment. It may be drink or drugs. Or you may be the sort of person who gets through the hard times by being stoical and working hard, looking down on those who resort to other means. However you try to address it, most people (and those who go to church are no exception) welcome a distraction from the everyday, the humdrum, and few people seem to be really satisfied.

### 2. **But is this really about weddings?**

This may seem rather an odd start to a sermon on today's readings. The passage from John's gospel is very familiar. It is referred to at every wedding service in every church throughout the land. It shows Jesus enjoying himself with his mother and disciples, and helping when the wine ran out – being part of the community and assisting the host in an embarrassing predicament. Or does it? Is this really just about a wedding?

One of the difficulties with this passage is that it can be read on a number of levels. Yes, clearly it does show Jesus taking

part in a community event and presumably enjoying himself. But John's gospel is rarely simple, and there is much more to it than a sort of magic 'sleight of hand' that made everything all right and saved the host from embarrassment. This incident is only to be found in John's gospel, where it is placed in a key position – as the first of Jesus' 'signs'. These are all miracles: but miracles with a meaning. (I can tell you which the others are should you want to know). John's gospel is carefully and selectively structured – there are 7 'signs', each of which tells us something important about the nature of Jesus' ministry and about God. John tells us that this first sign 'revealed his glory' and that his disciples believed in him. As such, it fits well in this season of Epiphany, when we are thinking about the way in which Christ was revealed to the nations. It sets the context for the whole of what follows.

First of all, we have an interesting dialogue between Jesus and his mother. In the gospel of John, Mary makes only two appearances – here (it is the only gospel without a birth narrative) and at the foot of the cross. For John, she seems to 'frame' not his physical life but his **adult ministry** – there at the beginning and the end. The conversation that Jesus has with her has been the subject of much speculation. This gospel

refers to the idea of Jesus' 'hour' at least seven times – later, he escapes capture because his hour has 'not yet come', whilst the structure of the gospel all points forward to the cross when his hour has come. In this passage, it seems as if Mary, who has been there from the start, and pondered all that has happened, recognises **before** Jesus himself that his hour **has** indeed now come. With this first sign, then, Jesus' identity as God's son (the 'word made flesh' with which John's gospel started) is revealed – initially just locally and somewhat secretly (we are told that the steward did not know where it came from). There was no fanfare, but the disciples saw and believed.

So the story tells us something crucial about Jesus – and perhaps about his relationship with his mother and disciples, and the gradual recognition of his own gifts. What does it tell us about God?

### **3. Water to wine**

To answer this, we have to look at the symbolism used in this story. Water is a good substance – what is changed is serviceable, even essential for life. We are told that the water used was that set aside for the Jewish rites of purification,

and we are even told the amount – 6 times 20 or 30 gallons. These details are not given by chance – they are significant. The contrast that John is pointing to is that between water used as part of a common religious practice and wine that represents here the out flowing of God’s grace through the coming of Jesus and which gives the capacity for enjoyment and fulfilment. The Jewish rites of purification were elaborate and tedious. The religious authorities saw meticulous observance as the way to win and keep God’s favour. Later in Jesus’ ministry, we will see him flouting these laws and challenging this understanding of God as a judge who can only be kept sweet by following the rules as defined by the priests. Changing this water into the means for enjoyment is a way of demonstrating that. We are told that the wine was unusually good. God wants to give us the very best of everything. He wants us to enjoy life fully. John carefully tells us that the first sign performed by Jesus turned the means of religious observance into pure gift. The quantity is deliberately generous – even absurd. There is a lavishness and sense of extravagance here. Even a large party would hardly manage to get through 180 gallons of wine! We used to make wine in gallon demijohns, and each one took some drinking (though we did manage).

#### **4. Transformation and abundance**

This then is a story about something far more than a wedding.. No, the theme is transformation and abundance. Listen too to some verses from the psalm set for today:

*How priceless is your love, O God!  
your people ... feast upon the abundance of your  
house;  
you give them drink from the river of your delights.  
For with you is the well of life, ' (Ps 36: 7-9a)*

Elsewhere in John’s gospel (John 10: 10), Jesus says:

*'I have come that they might have life and have it  
**abundantly**'.*

It is God’s gifts, lavishly bestowed on us, that are the real cause for celebration. And we learn more about these in the reading from Corinthians. The message throughout is that neither temporary distractions such as entertainment (whether of the harmless or harmful kind), nor religious observance and hard work can buy or earn God’s love and favour. These are given to us freely and abundantly. This does not of course mean that life will be easy, or save us from hard times, but it does give meaning and purpose - true life.

And in this Eucharist service, there is a cup of wine – symbol of God’s transforming love poured out for us. Sadly, at present, we are not sharing the common cup, but the symbolism remains. As we receive the bread, let us ask for his God’s gifts to transform our everyday lives – both our struggles and our celebrations - through His grace. **Amen**