

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> January 2021**  
**Third Sunday of Epiphany**

**Collect**

God of all mercy,  
your Son proclaimed good news to the poor,  
release to the captives,  
and freedom to the oppressed:  
anoint us with your Holy Spirit  
and set all your people free  
to praise you in Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

**Revelation 19:6-10**

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunder-peals, crying out,  
'Hallelujah!  
For the Lord our God  
the Almighty reigns.  
Let us rejoice and exult  
and give him the glory,  
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,  
and his bride has made herself ready;  
to her it has been granted to be clothed  
with fine linen, bright and pure'—  
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

And the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' And he said to me, 'These are true words of God.' Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, 'You must not do that! I am a fellow-servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.'

**John 2:1-11**

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.' Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

## Sermon

We've been using the Christmas to Epiphany Order of Service for a few weeks now, and I wonder how familiar you are becoming with the language that is used. You may have noticed that in the Eucharistic Prayer, there is a brief comment on some of the things that have come up in the readings over the past weeks – the visit of the magi; the baptism of Christ; and the wedding at Cana, this morning's gospel reading. This is what the Eucharistic Prayer says:

“In the water made wine  
the new creation was revealed at the wedding feast.  
Poverty was turned to riches, sorrow into joy.”

I sometimes think it can be a good exercise to try to encapsulate all that we have to say – or indeed all that we have heard – in a sermon into a very brief statement. And as I was thinking about this morning's readings, I wondered whether this summary from the Eucharistic Prayer is the statement I would use. Perhaps if we have a look at the gospel reading, we can decide together.

The wedding at Cana is quite a familiar story. In the preface to the marriage service, we are reminded of the event in the phrase: “Our Lord Jesus Christ was himself a guest at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and through his Spirit he is with us now.” Familiarity can both help and hinder us – it gives us a sense of identity and belonging, but can prevent us from noticing important details, or indeed allowing ourselves to read and hear the story afresh.

John's gospel tends not to talk about miracles, but rather “signs”, and this is the first of seven signs identified by John. The other signs include three acts of healing, walking on water, feeding the five thousand and raising Lazarus from the dead. This perhaps helps us to understand what it is that John meant by a “sign”. Each one reveals to us something of the nature and purposes of Jesus.

So what do we discover at the wedding at Cana? We need to remember the significance of weddings. First, quite obviously, then as now, they are a time of celebration. During a recent House Group conversation, one of the things that we talked about was the way some of us who did not go to church until later in life assumed that everything happening in a church building must be extremely serious, and probably also quite boring. Of course all kinds of things happen at St. Mary's and there are certainly times for being serious, but John gives us quite a clear indication that Jesus liked a good time. He enjoyed a party.

In the culture of first century Palestine, honour and shame were of particular significance. Events like weddings were designed to bring honour. They often lasted for several days with large numbers attending. Refusing to attend brought shame – as did running out of wine. We do need to think just a little about who it brought shame on. The obvious answer is the host. But there is something else, too. Because of the number of guests, these weddings had a bit of the “bring a bottle” mentality. Guests brought wine as part of their offering. So if we consider why the wine had run out, it may have been the result of unpreparedness on the part of the host, or it could have been that the guests had not brought enough themselves. And if we remember that Jesus, his mother and the disciples were at the wedding – none of whom were among the wealthiest – it is possible that they could have felt the shame, too.

With this background, it is fascinating to observe what actually happens. The wine runs out, and Mary – referred to only as the mother of Jesus – notices and tells Jesus. He responds somewhat dismissively, and she tells the servants to do as he says. He asks for six water jars to be filled. The servants do so, and he tells them to draw some out and take it to the chief steward. The chief

steward, once he has tasted, calls over the bridegroom to comment about the high quality of the wine.

Notice the place of Mary. I can never decide whether Jesus always intended to act, or whether he needed the prompt from his mother. When Mary first alerts Jesus to the situation, it sounds as though he has no intention of doing anything – his response is almost rude. Yet she is completely confident that he will act. Is that because she knows him so well? Because of the depth of their relationship, which means that even if he doesn't feel the need to do something, he will act because his mother requests it? Or is it because the exchange between them shows us something of significance?

There is something about this exchange that gives me confidence that Jesus really does care about our daily lives. He has the opportunity to decide that his purposes will be defined only by how his life ends. And by saying to his mother that his hour has not yet come, he indicates that it is a real possibility. Yet his actions are quite the opposite. While that hour is crucial, so is all that leads up to it. Just as our eternal lives are crucial, and so is everything that happens in this life.

Notice also the other characters who appear in this scene. It is the servants who go and collect the water, and then take what is drawn from the water jars to the chief steward. Just think about status for a moment. In this scene we have the bridegroom, called over by the chief steward; the chief steward; and the servants. We observe the chief steward tasting the wine that he has been brought, and calling over the bridegroom to comment on its quality, bringing praise on the bridegroom. But it is the servants who actually know what has happened – and who is responsible. What the chief steward does is perfectly understandable – it will probably find him favour with his employer because he has sought to draw attention to his generosity. What the bridegroom does is equally understandable – why should he quibble if he is being praised for something he knows he has had no part in. This is a party, after all. And no harm is done through this mutual appreciation.

And yet the servants know something that the chief steward and bridegroom have failed to notice. They know something about Jesus. Something that will have the power to transform them.

If we return to that phrase from the Eucharistic Prayer, I wonder whether it's a good summary of what we have just explored in the story of the wedding at Cana. Let me remind you once again what it says:

“In the water made wine  
the new creation was revealed at the wedding feast.  
Poverty was turned to riches, sorrow into joy.”

It would be easy to see Jesus's actions as sparing the blushes of the bridegroom, maintaining the status quo in this culture of honour and shame. The bridegroom's blushes are indeed spared. His poverty in having run out of wine is turned into the rich surplus of fine wine – and the party continues.

But that isn't the point of the story. What Jesus is revealing through this first sign is indeed the new creation. Not only are the bridegroom's blushes spared, but so too are those of the poorest, who had insufficient means to bring wine to the wedding. And it is their poverty that is really transformed into riches, their sorrow into joy, because they have glimpsed something of who Jesus really is. And their lives will never be the same again.

Amen