

Epiphany 2

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on the second Sunday of Epiphany, 16 January 2022

Readings: 1 Corinthians 12 vv 1-11 and John 2 vv 1-11

Today's Gospel is familiar to many of us – and, like many of the gospel passages, can be read in so many ways. I'd like to look at two that strike me as particularly significant.

Firstly, we see a rather different side of Mary to the rather passive and even submissive young woman we meet in the Christmas stories. Here, we are left in no doubt about the influence of Mary as Jesus' mother. A marriage is a big day for celebrating the uniting of two individuals and their families. Then to the potential shame of the host, the wine runs out. Mary sees the threatened embarrassment, and shares the information with her son. What may have begun as a mother's concern to allay a difficult social situation develops into a challenge to Jesus. Not from Mary, but from within himself.

Mary is the wise catalyst in two situations. The first is the matter of empty wine jars. The second concerns the power of her son to do something about it. We will never know whether or not she knew the measure of what she was saying or that this moment would become a turning point, another epiphany, another moment of proclaiming Jesus' unique identity. But her intuition of something greater happening seems to be reflected in her request to the servants to 'Do whatever he tells you'. Jesus, it seems, is left with no option, in spite of his rather brusque reply to Mary's intervention.

We cannot know the turmoil inside Jesus as he approached this moment of no return, as his unique gifts and his divine nature were revealed to the world for the first time. We know how committed he was to do the Father's will, but that does not mean it was without terrible fear and anguish. And how did he know his action, whatever it was, would have any effect? A mother's long memory, and her sense of timing and intuition may have realised that this could be another stage in the momentous events surrounding the birth and life of her son.

But Jesus still had to struggle with himself over the decision to do something which would change things forever - indeed, which would change the history of the world. We now know what happened, that Jesus' positive action declared his identity for all time, and that this act brought forth an extravagant and lavish gift from God to the assembled company then, and to us today.

So Jesus changed the water into wine. The stone jars of water, prepared for the Jewish rites of purification, represent what Judaism offers to those who need purity. Jesus takes that water and transforms it – a foretaste of what he will do next: go to the temple in Jerusalem and 'cleanse' it to signify its rebuilding through his resurrection.

And here is the second point. We see that God doesn't do things by halves. Shame, as we have seen, is about to spoil the enjoyment of the wedding feast, as the wine is exhausted. When Jesus gives in to the simple throw away line of his mother, Mary to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' And so the stone vats are filled with water – which, when the guests taste it, is the best wine they have ever tasted. And there is plenty to go round – some 150 gallons. That's over 900 bottles! God doesn't do things by halves.

A wedding in the ancient world was an unparalleled feast. Celebrations continued for days on end. For the people among whom Jesus grew up, a wedding meant a pause from seemingly endless drudgery and labour, and a chance to eat and drink abundant food

and wine, in stark contrast to their typical daily fare. The life that God intends for us is a life where there is enough: an abundance that springs from God's own abundance.

But God intends more for us than mere sustenance. There should be enough wine, and it should be good wine, the finest wine. The marriage supper to which God invites us is meant to bring us pleasure and joy. The life God intends for us is one filled with beauty and contentment and all good things. *Pleasure is not immoral*. As we see at this wedding feast where Jesus reveals himself, the day of banqueting and feasting is also the day of reconciliation, joy, and peace.

Even though we often see in John's gospel the other worldly and mysterious and spiritual side of Jesus, this miracle makes a strong case that the Christian life is grounded in simple, daily pleasures like good food and wine: following Jesus is as much about earth as it is about heaven. God became incarnate, he was born amongst us, to bring heaven down to us, to bring the peace and abundance, that is God's intention for all people and places, into every corner of human life. This is why the commandments are that we love God *and* that we love our neighbours as ourselves. This is why we much be concerned with the well being of the poor and those in need.

If we want to live as authentically as Jesus asked us and to relish the abundance of transforming life he promised, we do well to listen again to Mary's words to the servants: 'Do whatever he tells you', and respond, whatever the challenge and the inconvenience, by saying 'Yes!' And we too may discover afresh that God doesn't do things by halves.

We are blessed with this feast at the Eucharistic table week-by-week, blessed with enough and more left over to share. And, in our joy, we are called to go out into God's world and share God's invitation: the table is set for all! Come and dine.