

ON THE THIRD DAY THERE WAS A WEDDING IN CANA

Sermon at the Eucharist on the Second Sunday of Epiphany

Readings:

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

THE story of the miracle at Cana is read every year on one of the Sundays of the Epiphany season. St John tells us that it was ‘the first of the signs that Jesus did’ and that ‘he manifested his glory’. This means it is an essential chapter in the gospel story, and an integral part of the celebration of the Epiphany season. As such, I have preached on it quite often over the years, and it has been an instructive experience for me to look back over past sermons and see what I said.

I seem to have been preoccupied with the wine. I have made much of the changing of water into wine, as a sign of what the collect calls the transforming of the poverty of our nature by the riches of God’s grace. I seem to have been very preoccupied with the *quantity* of wine – six jars of twenty or thirty gallons – about a thousand bottles in all. Of course in my sermons I have always drawn very sober conclusions about this speaking to us of the generosity of God, but I can’t help feeling that over the years I have been missing some other sides of the story.

‘On the third day, there was a wedding in Cana’. Those ten words are my text this morning. Not the water, not the wine, just a wedding; a wedding in Cana on the third day. So first of all, the wedding. Whose wedding, we don’t know. The bridegroom is not named; the bride is not mentioned. All we know is that Mary was there, Jesus was there, and the new little group of his friends and followers was there. Later on we learn that one of the disciples, Nathanael, came from Cana.

But we also know that the picture of a wedding is a very significant one in the teaching of Jesus. He tells the story of the people invited to a wedding who made excuses. He tells the story of the man who turned up at a wedding without his wedding clothes. He tells of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, those who had made preparations and those who had not. When criticized for not fasting, he asked whether the wedding guests could be expected to mourn while the bridegroom was with them? So he cast himself in the role of bridegroom, with echoes of Isaiah comparing God to a bridegroom married to his people. John the Baptist said the same when he compared himself to the

best man, and Jesus as the groom. St Paul said the same when he compared Jesus to a husband, loving and cherishing the church as his bride. St John the Divine wrote of the marriage supper of the Lamb, and of the city of God coming down out of heaven as a bride adorned for her husband. And in the background of all these passages is the wedding-symbolism of the Song of Songs.

A wedding, then, is a very powerful picture in the Bible of the love that God has for his people, that Christ has for his church, the community of his disciples; and a very powerful picture of the life of joy and celebration and festivity to which God calls us all.

‘There was a wedding in Cana’, says St John ... ‘and Jesus was there’. So the scene is set for a story in which Jesus, if not the bridegroom, is certainly the one who takes command of the occasion, the bringer of festivity, the herald of joy. And as St John tells the story, it’s not a ‘spiritual’ joy that Jesus brings, it’s the very down-to-earth joy of an unexpected quantity of wine.

But before we reach that point in the story, things have gone badly wrong. The wine which the bridegroom has brought runs out. Of course, things that go wrong at weddings are the stuff of comedy, and we know why. We over-prepare, we over-plan, we build up our expectations of the perfect day, and then the smallest mishap feels like a disaster. Except this was a big mishap, and it was a disaster. It’s a story of human failure, of the spoiling of the perfect occasion, until Jesus retrieves the situation and saves the day.

By now you will pick up the clue in the other half of my text: ‘*on the third day there was a wedding in Cana*’. The third day of what? Well, if you turn back to Chapter 1 of St John you find Jesus on the move with his disciples – now in Judaea, now in Galilee – here one day, there the next; and now ‘on the third day’ they are at the wedding in Cana. But we cannot read those words ‘on the third day’ without picking up a further clue. At the end of the gospel story there will be a third day when the story of human failure, and mishap, and disaster is put right; when God retrieves the situation and saves the day; when the bringer of festivity and joy returns from the dead, and the great wedding feast begins. So this village wedding with its tale of failure and redemption is an anticipation of the day of resurrection, the last day, the day when the marriage feast of the Lamb has come, and the city of God comes down out of heaven as a bride adorned for her husband.

Jesus first manifested his glory at a village wedding. There in the middle of human preoccupations, preparations, plans, expectations built up and then dashed,

muddle and failure, sorrow and joy, Jesus manifested his glory. The story of the miracle at Cana takes its place alongside other gospel stories that tell of the presence of Christ in the down-to-earth: Jesus on the road to Emmaus, Jesus at the lakeside, his own words that we shall find him among the poor, the naked, the sick, the homeless, or those in prison. It takes its place alongside the whole Christmas story, the mystery of the Word made flesh, tabernacled among us in the Bethlehem stable. It takes its place alongside the mystery of the Eucharist, of bread and wine transfigured to be his living body, his lifeblood. When Archbishop William Temple described Christianity as the most materialistic of religions, this is what he meant: that there is nothing of earth, of God's creation, which is not also a sign of heaven, of God's re-creation.

Christian artists and poets have developed the theme. Stanley Spencer pictured Christ in Cookham ... Francis Thompson placed him 'not on Gennesareth but Thames' ... in one of his poems our own Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy imagined 'when Christ came to Birmingham'. 'The world', said Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'is charged with the grandeur of God'. But we need their eyes to see it: to find Christ's presence in Worcester; on our roads, beside our lakes and rivers, at our wedding feasts and domestic supper-tables; and in the faces of those who turn to us for help.

And we need those poets', artists' eyes, those eyes of faith, now more than ever. Life for most of us, and some much more acutely than for others, feels like a wedding where the wine has run dry, a place where the joy has evaporated. Of course, we thank God for the vaccines, for all the measures which have saved us from much worse, for the continuing devotion of health workers and teachers and so many others. It is not all grey. But it is still an effort for many of us to say 'the world is charged with the grandeur of God', to see the manifesting of the glory of God in our day-to-day lives when those lives are still so beset by sickness and loneliness and anxiety and a longing for normality. But that of course is precisely the point these gospel stories are making. It is precisely in the here-and-now of our lives, beset by sickness and loneliness and anxiety and a longing for normality, that we are to look for the presence of Christ. Not in some spruced-up reality, some sacred arena, some other world where sickness and loneliness and anxiety do not impinge; but here, on this earth, in the city of Worcester; now, in the year of Our Lord two thousand and twenty-two; here in the poverty of our nature we are to see the riches of God's grace; here in the waters of our mishaps and failures, we are to taste the wine of Christ's presence.

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