

Epiphany 3, Year B 24/01/2021

Genesis 14.17-20; Revelation 19.6-10; John 2.1-11

Genesis 14.17-20

¹⁷ After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). ¹⁸ And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. ¹⁹ He blessed him and said, 'Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; ²⁰ and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!' And Abram gave him one-tenth of everything.

Revelation 19.6-10

⁶ 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. ⁷ 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; ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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.' ¹⁰ 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

¹ On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ² Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³ When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' ⁴ And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' ⁵ His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' ⁶ Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷ Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸ He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. ⁹ 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 ¹⁰ 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.' ¹¹ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Six stone jars each holding 20 or 30 gallons. That is going to be a lot of wine! If we go with the lower estimate of 20 gallons we are looking at something like 618 modern 75cl bottles. The higher one gives us 927! A lot of wine indeed. I have often wondered how our brothers and sisters in Christian denominations where they embrace tee-totalism interpret this passage. In many fellowships of the past – maybe even the present – Jesus would have been drummed out for encouraging such consumption of wine. It is a case, I suppose, of shaping Christianity to fit our own preconceptions rather than letting the words of Christ challenge and re-shape our

ideas – and lest we develop a sense of too great a superiority, it would be well to ask what preconceptions of ours are non-negotiable despite the words and actions of Christ.

Still, 120 or 180 gallons of wine is a lot to get our imaginations around. John presents this as the first of the signs that Jesus reveals. The first in the sequence and it can seem to us something of an extravagance, or even an irrelevance. With all the needs in the world, then and now, Jesus makes his first sign the saving of a wedding feast. It is probably not what we would choose or advise. The other evangelists all have Jesus beginning his public ministry with preaching, healing and casting out demons, following his grappling with Satan at the testing in the wilderness. Those things are perhaps more what we would want to see the Messiah doing. John though gives us this picture, a different lens through which to understand what God is doing in and through his Christ.

At this point we should remind ourselves of the way John has framed his introduction to us of the Christ. This is the one who is the Word, with God, from the beginning. This is the only Son who makes visible the unseen God. This is the divine Word who became flesh and pitched his tent among us and in John's words *we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth*. That word *glory* is the obvious link between John's opening words and this strange sign in John 2 where we read *Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him*. So, this transforming of large quantities of water into wine is a revealing (an epiphany) of the glory Jesus has as the only Son of the Father. What does the sign reveal, then, about the grace and truth of God?

In terms of truth this is the first sign to start to make good on the assertions John has been making about the identity of the eternal Word-made-flesh. The Prologue in chapter 1 (verses 1-18) present him as the Son, and as the source of light and life in the world. As we meet John the Baptist, his testimony is that this is the coming Messiah and also the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The encounter, which we looked at last week, with Nathanael further presents the claim that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ of God. This sign at Cana is a first display of the Creator's power in the world, working through the Son. Water transforms into wine all the time. However it usually takes the additions of grapes and time, time for fermentation and transformation. Here the process is dramatically speeded up. But I think that is a clue that God's miracles always work with the grain of nature, he doesn't do harm to the natural order. The natural order here also seems to be a consideration of what is natural for human beings. From the very beginning two people have been coming together for marriage and, just as at Cana, this is not a private thing but an event recognised, validated and celebrated by the wider community – as indeed our own Church of England marriage service makes reference to at the beginning of the ceremony. It is significant that Jesus' first sign in John's gospel is one that celebrates – and enables – a normal celebration. Too many Christians down the centuries have embraced an ascetism, not only in worship but in daily living also, that contradicts the natural joys of life. As Archbishop William Temple puts it in his devotional *Readings in John's Gospel: Christ is not a grim task-master in obedience to whom life becomes gloomy. ... Joy is one of the fruits of His Spirit. We wholly fail to represent Him to men if we fail to make men see this in our lives*. Yet I am still encountering people, mostly of my age and older, who were successfully put off Christianity for life by a church culture which made Sundays days for obligatory church (often 2 or 3 times) with long, dare I say also dull, sermons and which frowned on dancing, partying, drinking, even cinema-going in some circles. But Christ's first sign saved the Wedding Feast and kept it going. There is a truth there about the nature and power of the creator but also there is a sign of His grace, to bring us to what later in John's Gospel Jesus will call *life in all its fullness*. Does our current church culture promote that for us is a question well worth asking.

The other lectionary readings point us to some other significant points implicit in what Jesus is doing here which also touch on his grace and truth. The first reading is the passage from Genesis with Abram (just before he is transformed into Abraham with the establishment of the Covenant with God) encountering the mysterious figure of Melchizedek. Christians have long held Melchizedek to be a sign or type of Christ in the Old Testament. He only appears here but Abram submits to him as priest of God Most High. His priesthood is taken as a characteristic of Christ's. Genesis introduces him as king of Salem, which is the place that will become David's Jerusalem, the city of peace. His name though is more title than name, it means 'king of righteousness', or perhaps 'the king is righteous'. King of righteousness, prince of the city of peace, the priest-king of God Most High. These are all titles and attributes that we recognise in Christ. Significantly for Christians this Melchizedek, the Priest-King, brings out bread and wine to seal his encounter with Abram. The ordinary once again makes a bridge between heaven and earth.

The second reading, from Revelation, takes us to the fulfilment of all things in Heaven and what do we see? We see that this fulfilment is launched and celebrated with a wedding feast, the marriage of Christ, the Lamb of God, with his bride, the people – the Church – of God. Again, in Christian thought over the last 2,000 years, the Wedding at Cana has been seen as a kind of pre-figuring of the final Wedding Feast of the Lamb. Jesus' role at Cana points to him as the one who ends up supplying the needs of the feast, in other words fulfilling the role of host. He takes the ordinary and everyday and by his word transforms it. Not only does he make this prodigious quantity of wine but it is of a superior quality. There is much scope there for our devotional reflection. What in our own lives could see transformation to a higher quality if we open ourselves to the meeting between heaven and earth that we see demonstrated at Cana? What do we write off about ourselves as only being ordinary, everyday water that Jesus could turn into something that takes forward his Kingdom? How could we look out on the ordinary and everyday and see it in the light of God's Kingdom? As George Herbert's poem, which we sing as the hymn 'Teach me my God and King' says:

*All may of thee partake;
nothing can be so mean,
which with this tincture, "for thy sake,"
will not grow bright and clean.*

*A servant with this clause
makes drudgery divine:
who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
makes that and the action fine.*

*This is the famous stone
that turneth all to gold;
for that which God doth touch and own
cannot for less be told.*

There, I think, is part of the challenge for us contained in this event at Cana. Can we lift the veil from the ordinary to reveal the splendour of God's purposes working themselves out in our daily lives? *Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.* Let us embark on the new week actively looking for Jesus to reveal his glory and so find ourselves strengthened in our belief.