

Epiphany 2019 (6.01.19) Evensong

Baruch 4: 36 – 5: 9; John 2: 1 – 11

The way the lectionary – that’s the system by which the Bible readings we read are set – is a bit of a mystery to me. By some fluke, which is far from unique, the New Testament lesson set for this evening – water into wine – is also set as the Gospel reading for Sunday morning in two weeks’ time. So if you come to 8.00am or 10.30am on Sunday 20th January, you get to hear Christine preaching on the miracle at the wedding at Cana in Galilee, and I’m kind of loathe to steal her thunder – except on the 20th January it’s a family service, so in two weeks we might get less of a sermon and more of an all-singing, all-dancing presentation.

I think at one family service here, I guess it must have been three years ago, I managed to change a glass of water into a rich ruby coloured liquid by some sleight of hand with food colouring. It’s a trick I honed for

school assemblies. And then one year, months and months and months after Epiphany, I was leaving the Rectory as a little lad and his mother went past on their way up to school. And when they’d got beyond the front door the little lad said in an almighty stage whisper “That’s Reverend Matthew: he can change water into wine!”

Which of course completely misses the point of John 2: 1 – 11. But Jesus does not do magic tricks. One of the problems with John 2: 1 – 11 is that it can suggest to us that Jesus *does* do magic tricks: Jesus can take a jar of water, say abracadabra and turn it into wine; therefore he must be the Son of God; therefore we ought to worship him. But that’s not how it works. This miracle does not prove that Jesus has some super-human power. He doesn’t. If he had, that would undermine the doctrine of the incarnation. What’s the point of the Word becoming flesh, of God assuming human frailty, if he doesn’t assume human frailty at all, but retains super-human powers? He

might as well stay in heaven sitting on a throne or floating on a cloud or whatever caricature of a remote God you want to adopt.

What's revealed to us about God in the Christmas story is that God completely and unreservedly self-empties himself in order to identify completely with the human condition. Any reading of John 2: 1 – 11, therefore, which suggests God self-emptied himself *except for* the ability to do a cool party trick with a glass of water, must be a wrong reading. The significance of John 2: 1 – 11 must lie elsewhere.

All sorts of points can be made. If you're of a more catholic persuasion you might find in the story some warrant for the tradition that Mary intercedes for us with her Son. If you're of a more protestant persuasion you may emphasise more the rebuke of Mary by Jesus and the suggestion that faithfulness to God takes priority over any family loyalty. You may want to make something out of the fact that in John's

Gospel the mother of Jesus is never called by name. She is never named as Mary. She is addressed as woman. And you may want to build on that some sort of doctrine of Mary being a second Eve, just as Jesus is a second Adam.

But perhaps the most surprising point of this story is that it changes nothing! The rest of the Gospel unfolds as if this miracle hasn't occurred. At a facetious level, Jesus doesn't get a reputation as someone who must be invited to every party to keep the drinks bill down; and more profoundly, nobody is convicted of the theological truth that Jesus is the Son of God. It takes another 18 chapters for that to unfold. It's not until after the resurrection, when so-called doubting Thomas puts his fingers in the wounds of Jesus, that the ultimate revelation about Jesus is placed on his lips when he says "My Lord and my *God!*" Everything up to that has been a gradual working towards it. And that is the climax: Jesus is God.

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

So this story, almost at the outset of John's gospel, works as a literary device to let us readers in on an insight that then has no subsequent narrative implications. We get an insight, an anticipation of what is to come. We know from the outset (almost) that Jesus gives a fullness, a richness, a quality of life. But then, having got that vision, we've got to bear with the ordinariness of the rest of the story until it gets to its climax.

And as we enter 2019 this is how our faith operates. It gives us vision, which changes everything and changes nothing. No matter how much faith we place in Jesus, we still seem to be hurtling towards the cliff edge of a no-deal Brexit; there are still 250 refugees a day crossing the Aegean Sea (now without the chance of being rescued by the two naval cutters that have been redeployed to the English Channel); there are still British soldiers being injured in Syria; there are still kids in Bridlington with no food for breakfast tomorrow morning. And yet we do have a vision.

That vision can be expressed in the terms of the apocryphal reading from Baruch – so like passages from Isaiah – of a completely different political world order, where people come from East and West to witness the glory of God; and it can be expressed in the terms of John 2 that there is a richness and a colour to life which transcends what we see about us. But however it is expressed, that vision, that revelation, that epiphany compels us to live as fully as we can by the standards of that vision, believing that we are anticipating and enacting a truth that will in due course be fully revealed.

Amen.