

Third Sunday of Epiphany 2021 (24.01.2021)

Genesis 14: 17 – 20; John 2: 1 – 11

A few years ago I perfected a primary school assembly which was the story of this morning's gospel reading – the wedding at Cana – with visual aids. I got a large glass jug of water – not a clay jar but a glass jug so the children could see there was just colourless water in it; and I ladled some of it out into a wine glass. Only I had a smidgen of red food colouring on the bottom of the ladle, so what I poured into the wine glass was a rich, red wine-like liquid. And I hawked this around the primary schools on the north side of Brid for a couple of years.

And then one summer morning, months after I'd done the assembly, which obviously was around this time, Epiphany, I was leaving the Rectory to come over into to church for Morning Prayer and there was a little lad walking up to school with his mum. And he recognised me, so we said hello, and then as I locked the front door and they moved off almost, but not

quite out of earshot, I heard the lad say to his mum, "That's Reverend Matthew. And he can turn water into wine!" Suddenly the mum seemed even more impressed than the young lad. And I've never done the assembly again – because I realised the fatal flaw in it.

I had reduced the mystery of the miracle into a cheap conjuring trick. Miracles are difficult to get our heads round, but whatever we say about miracles, they are never a conjuring trick. When we see a conjurer's act, what we're amazed at is their expertise, their dexterity and sleight of hand. We're asking ourselves: was there a secret compartment, was there a second pack of cards, was there a false bottom, how did he get it up his sleeve without us noticing? We're asking ourselves: how did he do it.

When we read a miracle in the Bible, "How did he do it?" is always the wrong question to ask, especially when, like turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana, the miracle is only in John's Gospel. John's Gospel is different to the other three. Or, to put it the

other way round, Matthew, Mark and Luke have a lot in common and John is the odd one out. Experts often call Matthew, Mark and Luke the *synoptic* Gospels. That means they all look with the same eye. Words beginning syn or sym are usually to do with coordinated-ness: synchronise, synthetic, sympathy, symphony. And optic obviously is to do with the eye, like optician. So Matthew, Mark and Luke are synoptic. They each have their own slant, Matthew and Luke contain material that's not in Mark, but they all look at the life of Jesus in the same way.

John's Gospel is a different sort of carry on. It was written much, much later - nobody can be sure just when - but decades and decades after Jesus lived and its purpose is not to provide a time-line of Jesus' life, but to be a theological commentary on it. John's Gospel reveals the significance of Jesus to us. It is a written exercise in the art of epiphany, in revealing who Jesus is to us. And the miracle at the wedding at Cana is *one* story of epiphany within the context of that greater epiphany. So the question isn't

'How/where/when did he do it?' The question is: what does it reveal?

We're told the wedding takes place *on the third day*. The third day after what? Well, if we ask ourselves that sort of question to try to plot Jesus' movements, we're not going to get anywhere. 'Third day' is theological code. On the third day is when Jesus was resurrected from the dead. Turning the water into wine is an analogy of the quality of new life Jesus is going to give us *on the third day* through his resurrection. Resurrection life is a life with the richness of wine as opposed to the dreariness of water.

Now, we know that alcohol is dangerous and addictive. There may be people joining this service who have a problematic relationship with alcohol. If that's so, please accept my apologies and simply use the analogy for as long as it's useful and then drop it. Analogies and metaphors always take us so far, and then break down. And for some of us, this one will break down sooner than it will for others. But the idea is that faith

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in the resurrected Jesus is transforming: it transforms the believer's life to give it a richness and vitality which goes beyond the dreariness of everyday existence. And that gift is illogical and extravagant, like providing really expensive wine for people who are too drunk to tell the difference.

All of which is cold comfort to a single parent who simply hasn't got food to feed their children with. And there are plenty of people in the Priory's parish who are literally in that position. Telling them that everything will be alright because Jesus rose from the dead is just a pious platitude . . . except believing in Jesus draws people to engage in mission. And the world-wide Anglican Communion has identified five marks of mission, two of which are directly applicable to people in this parish whose cupboards are bare.

One of the marks of mission is pastoral care. Donating food to a foodbank is pastoral care. There are foodbanks at Christ Church, at the Hinge Centre and at Headlands School. Anything brought to the Rectory

will be shared between Christ Church and the Hinge Centre.

Another mark of mission is challenging unjust structures in society. And that involves us making political decisions. We each need to decide whether providing free school meal kids with food over half term is better done by the Marcus Rashford model or the Boris Johnson model. We each need to decide whether we approve of the £20 a week coronavirus uplift to Universal Credit being removed at the end of March. And when we're taking into account that maintaining it would cost the average income tax payer £170 a year, we may wish to take into account the irrationally extravagantly miracle of wedding at Cana. But we may also wish to take into account that Jesus taught us to be as wise as serpents. Such decisions are not easy or obvious. But such decisions could determine whether children in our parish are fed or not. And such decisions are the stuff of which miracles are made.

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Amen.