

**“Water into wine; changing life for good.”**

**Sermon on Third Sunday of Epiphany by The Revd Canon David Hodgson at All Saints Church Wokingham on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2019**

*Gospel reading: John 2: 1 -11*

Every vicar has a wedding rescue story. A story about the wedding that nearly turned into a total disaster but at the last minute was rescued by some miracle. The favourite wedding miracle in my ministry involves an organist, a flower-arranger and a mobile phone. It was in the early 1990s so they were car phones in those days – and it was a miracle if anyone you wanted to phone actually had one!. I was vicar of an Essex village with a beautiful medieval church listed in Simon Jenkin’s book *England’s Thousand Best churches.*, It was a big summer wedding – no expense spared.

Early on the morning of the wedding the visiting florist arrived. Before any of us realised what was happening, she had erected an absolutely huge green monstrosity between the organ and the choir stalls. When the organist arrived and she saw this monument there was no placating her. She was so enraged! Because of this arrangement she could neither see nor be seen; she could not see the priest, the nave or the choir. So, with 30 minutes to go before the bride arrived the organist resigned on the spot and walked out of the church. Now this was a village with a population of less than a thousand and it was at least 8 miles from the nearest town of any size. There were no replacement organists. It was desperate I can tell you! With great trepidation I found the groom in the churchyard and explained that we had no music for his wedding! Which is when the miracle happened. To my complete surprise he just smiled. No problem. One of his friends was a fully competent organist and he had been invited to the wedding. And what’s more he had a car phone! And it connected! to discover that he was on his way and on time - and all was well. The groom’s miraculous friend leapt into action on the organ as soon as he arrived and hardly anyone including the bride knew any different until after the service – except that the back of the organist’s head seemed strangely familiar to some of the groom’s guests!

So what about the story of Jesus at the wedding in Cana? Is it just the most amazing example of a wedding rescue story like one every vicar can tell?

We need not approach St John’s Gospel as if it is a literal and historical narrative. The author of this gospel has not written this gospel to amuse or amaze us. He has a different purpose. And he tells us what that purpose is in Chapter 20: “...these [signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name”.

St John’s Gospel was written to show its readers that Jesus is the one to put your trust in for life. The message of this gospel is about Jesus Christ. He is the one who not only changes water into wine but also can change our lives. With Jesus there is a completely new and wonderful kind of relationship with God and with people too. This is a relationship based on grace – based on the undeserved blessing and favour which God has for us.. In Christ and in the community of Christ we can live in total acceptance; forgiven by God. And so in the Christian community we have the freedom to accept one another and to forgive one another because each one of us is accepted and forgiven by God.

The changing of the water into wine symbolises how Christ has changed human life for good. Life has a new basis, a new ground, a new matrix for us to grow from. We are no longer alone

in and threatened by the world. Instead we are deeply grounded in the inexhaustible love of God for us which is the heartbeat and the destiny of life.

In a way the wine in this story symbolises God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit. The water might symbolise our human energies and gifts. Because of Jesus we have been given the Holy Spirit which transforms our gifts and energies towards bringing the enjoyable wine of the peace and the joy and the love of God into our lives, our families and our communities.

The event when we as Christians come together to celebrate and to give thanks for Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit and to pray for the coming of God's kingdom is in the Holy Eucharist where we offer our energies and gifts to God, share in the body of Christ and receive the Holy Spirit to renew us.

This story of the changing of the water into wine is a clear reference to the Eucharist where we continue to share in the body and blood of Christ. Wine in the Bible is a symbol of the fulness of joy. And the Eucharist is a feast and a feast – often a wedding feast - is symbolic all through the Bible of the fulfilment of God's purposes in his community of peace, and of freedom from sin. In the Eucharist we have a symbolic foretaste of God's kingdom community of joy and peace. In the church we must seek always to let our life as a community be filled and led by the Holy Spirit so that the character of God's community of peace and joy is revealed. We do not always succeed; being frail and fearful as we are; and so we need to rely on God ever more deeply to be the kind of community we could be - changed by the miracle of Christ for us - as the water was changed into wine. This Eucharist when the wine is poured and shared becomes for us God's feast for his people; a feast of forgiveness and grace, given when Christ died for us.

I have never been to a feast or a party and been offered only water – especially not a wedding. God invites us to a new life where the water of our all – too - human expectations will be changed into the wine of his marvellous promise of peace and love. That is God's invitation to us. It's rather more interesting and exciting even than going to a wedding. And that promise is for our own lives and also for the life of this community.

As we go forward in 2019 most importantly let us ask confidently for the Holy Spirit - to infuse us as a community more and more with the wine of peace, healing, acceptance and joy.

I need hardly remind you that we are living right now in a society which is very divided in its views and perspectives; about the identity of our country, who our best international partners should be for future flourishing, what our future direction should be, how best to run the economy; and these are strongly held views . The country and Parliament are divided. And our church and our local community are bound to reflect the same differences of opinion. Also, within the church community globally and reflected within our own diocese there are also divisions on ethical issues as well as political ones – the most prominent one is human sexuality, whether intimate same-sex relationships, same-sex marriages, may be blessed by the church and fall within the purposes of God and God's grace. And for some of those who disagree with same-sex marriages on religious grounds it is more than a simple ethical issue; it is about who may be considered as being saved and welcomed into God's community of peace and freedom.

In all of these divisions of opinions and aspirations as to the way forward both for our country and for our church; those who have faith in the love of Christ bring peace and acceptance into our lives and communities; we must not lose sight of this promise; and always seek the Holy Spirit's power to change what threatens to be a disastrous outcome into a new and even better result.

As Jesus made a difference at the wedding in Cana so he will make a difference in our community, in our life together and in each of our own lives.

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