

Sermon 17 January 2016
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Some years ago in London I was approached by one of those street-corner evangelists you meet in front of railway stations from time to time. Plainly this one had some things to learn, since as any psychiatrist will tell you, yes/no questions are not good conversation openers. When he shouted at me “Do you know Jesus?” I was able to shout back “yes, I do” and keep walking.

A better question would have been “how do you know Jesus?” This is one of the central questions of Christian life, but it’s also one we are forced to consider carefully at this time of the Church’s year, called by some parts of the Western church Epiphanytide and lasting from Epiphany on 6 January to the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple on 2 February.

The Greek word *epiphaneia* means manifestation or striking appearance. The feast of the Epiphany celebrates God’s manifestation to the Gentiles through the visit of the wise men to the infant Jesus, and the season of Epiphanytide explores some of the other moments at the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry in which his divine nature and purpose are revealed – such as his baptism in the River Jordan, the calling of his first disciples, and his first miracles.

The curious thing is that Christ’s manifestation in the events of Epiphanytide often seems anything but clear and striking. Many of the people who encounter Jesus in these stories only realise what’s happening in a slow and piecemeal fashion, if they realise at all. For every John the Baptist, who according to Luke’s Gospel was so full of the Holy Spirit that he recognised Jesus as the Christ while both of them were still *in utero*, the Gospels introduce us to a dozen others who aren’t sure who Jesus is or what he has come to do. Even his first disciples, the fishermen who lay down their nets and follow Jesus as soon as they see him, are often endearingly clueless about his intentions.

Today’s Gospel reading is a prime example of Jesus being a bit confusing. When his mother tells him the wine has run out, he says “what concern is that of mine”? Then he tells the servants to fill up six enormous stone jars with water. They must have been quite perplexed – and even more so when he tells them to draw off the water and take it to be tasted by the steward. Once it turns out to be wine, of course, those servants – as well as the disciples and the mother of Jesus – all know that a miracle has taken place, but we don’t know if the steward, the bridegroom, or any other guests ever find out. Do they just carry on partying – helped, no doubt, by this new, superior beverage – without realising what a momentous event has taken place behind the scenes?

In John’s Gospel, this is Jesus’ first miracle, and it is quite different from the healing miracles he goes on to perform all over Galilee in front of large crowds. What, you might ask, is the point of this little “starter miracle” at Cana? And, quasi-private as it

is, why should it be part of the season of Epiphanytide, which is about striking appearances?

Of course, the miracle at Cana is theologically charged. Taking place “on the third day” it points forwards to the Resurrection. In changing the substance of the water into wine, it signals Christ’s transformative effect on the world and establishes a precedent for the transubstantiation of wine into Christ’s blood at the Eucharist. It also signifies the end of time and the coming of the Kingdom, which will be like a wedding feast as Jesus teaches in Matthew’s Gospel (Matt. 22).

This theological understanding – though part of God’s manifestation to *us* when we read the Gospel—was not available to those who witnessed the miracle at Cana. How did they experience a manifestation of God in the person and actions of Jesus Christ? What about it helped them to know Jesus?

I believe that it’s not so much the physical change of the water into wine as the proof that this furnishes of Christ’s love and his desire to bring joy. Christ is so generous that he responds with overwhelming love to those who reach out, even tentatively. “They have no wine,” his mother remarks. In response Jesus gives them more than they could ever drink. He responds with the same overflowing abundance of love that created the world “through him” (John 1:3) – because Christ was made incarnate not just to fulfil the law, or even to heal a broken world, but to bring joy to those who see him.

In the wedding at Cana, it is Christ’s loveliness, embodied in the generosity of the miracle, that enables those who witness it to know something about who Jesus is.

The love distinctive of Christ is also distinctive of his Church, St Paul teaches in his letter to the Corinthians. In the passage we heard today he explains that the spirit gives different individuals different talents, but all for the common good. He goes on to speak of the Church as one body with many members, in which what is good for one is good for all (1 Cor 12: 12-31). And the key, the underlying quality that defines and unites the Church and its members is love. Love contains, subsumes within itself, and supersedes all the other spiritual gifts. “...If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” (1 Cor. 13:2)

How do we know Jesus then? The answer is: first, foremost and always by his love. And because of Jesus, we have love as a gift, like the wedding guests at Cana who received wine unlooked for, and abundantly. Because of Christ’s love for us, we will always have love to give one another. This is the joyous news which we celebrate gathered for this Eucharist: even if we approach Jesus with doubt, or incomprehension, he will give us more of his love than we could ever ask for.