

Sermon preached at King's College

January 20th 2019: Epiphany 2

John 2.1-12: *The first of Jesus' signs*

A sequence of epiphanies makes up the season of Epiphany. In the Coming of the Magi, Jesus – the helpless baby in a plain manger - is shown to be divine and divinely significant in a myriad of ways. The gifts speak of kingship, holiness and death.

In his Baptism, thirty years later, Jesus is shown to be the beloved Son of God in a momentary glimpse of God as Trinity. The gospel writers do their best to capture a moment in which God is heard, seen and sensed, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And then we see the first sign of Jesus' power, as he turns water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana.

The quality of epiphany in each of these events is rich; and layered with meanings, resonances and significance. All these layers have developed, or unfolded, as time has passed: during Christ's own earthly time, in the first understandings of the Church, and down the ages ever since. If we are ever tempted to think their full meaning is fixed and static, we do no justice either to the events themselves, or to the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus assured us that the Spirit would lead us into all truth; but he did not put an end point on that process.

This is true of the story of the Wedding at Cana, and it means that no single sermon could begin to capture it all. Today I'm just going to look at how something of such magnitude happened in a few fleeting moments of intimacy.

Jesus is at a do. We know from the gospels that he was not averse to a good do. If you google pictures of the Wedding at Cana, the first to come up is an enormous canvas by Veronese. Although Jesus is shown at the centre of things, he is actually in the midst of a bustling, busy, detailed scene. It's the product of a Venetian imagination, of course, but he had the bustle and hubbub right. Forget those demure English wedding breakfasts.

In all the ebb and flow of people, Jesus' mother simply says, 'they've run out of wine'. His reply is often said to be abrupt, even rude or petulant. In fact the Greek is simply as economically brief as it could be. And, as so often, we have no adverbs, no specific pointers to the tone of voice. I grew up amongst Jewish families though, and the scene is entirely imaginable. The mother provokes her boy because she knows he can do something, or should. And the boy might eye-roll, but he knows she's right. There is wit here, and why not?

We know that Mary knows because she doesn't wait for an answer; she just tells the nearby servants to do what he tells them. He does, and they find themselves taking new (and superior) wine to the maitre d'. They are probably too terrified of him to explain, even though they know what has just happened. It would sound mad

anyway. The news does not travel around the party. It must be that the bridegroom has saved the best till last. Here is more wit in the story-telling. We know now that Jesus is the real bridegroom, to use some biblical imagery: the host of the heavenly banquet. Within the story, virtually everyone simply carries on drinking and, no doubt, dancing.

The economy of the narrative continues. *Jesus thus manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him.* That single half-verse captures what I'm calling both the magnitude and the intimacy of what happened. We know from lots of texts that Jesus was extremely cautious about revealing his power. It's almost like a bird or butterfly occasionally revealing an astonishing wing-flash of colour and beauty.

In Jesus' case that flash is an intimation of his glory. Glory: such an important idea for the evangelist John. That brief but extraordinary miracle draws the disciples in: we can only imagine their wide-eyed wonder. But this is small-scale, minority-report stuff. There are just six of them, plus Mary and the servants. We know it as an epiphany; for them it was a just a peep. A few very ordinary folk get a glimpse of the glory which was to change the world.

The hint in the story as to the magnitude of all this, apart from the simple miracle of turning water into wine, is this. It's in the magnitude of the very wine. Six stone jars of that size would hold our equivalent of more than 700 bottles of wine. And, as the story also tells us, there was quality as well as quantity. Here is largesse; here is superabundance. There is nothing parsimonious about Jesus' response to our needs, however trivial: no portion control for him.

This was not a big public miracle. This was not the Feeding of 5,000 (plus women and children); nor was it raising someone from the dead. In the background of a provincial party Jesus simply gives a first hint of his majesty and mission. And he chooses to do so with an over-the-top act of generosity and hospitality. It was massively significant, and unnoticed by virtually everyone there.

The massive significance of Jesus is virtually unnoticed by most people around us again, today. A lot of Christians are trying in lots of ways to do something about this. In such a climate, I suspect that we do well to take a leaf out of Jesus' book – usually a wise idea – and try to give glimpses of the magnitude in small, localised, intimate ways. It's in the quality of our immediate relationships where the magnificence of Jesus and the boundless superabundance of his love and mercy can be revealed. They will be little, intimate moments. But the things we can say, the things we can do, and the ways in which we say and do them, *can* give glimpses. The most fleeting flash of that love and mercy might be like the momentary glitter of the kingfishers along the river here. But, with God's grace, it might also have the quality of miracle.