

10th September 2023 Sunday 9.00 am and 10.30 am

GOD BELIEVES IN PARTYING

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell
Presbyterian Church



READINGS:

Isaiah 62:1-5

Zion's New Name

**For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet,
till her vindication shines out like the dawn,
her salvation like a blazing torch.**

**² The nations will see your vindication,
and all kings your glory;
you will be called by a new name
that the mouth of the Lord will bestow.**

**³ You will be a crown of splendour in
the Lord's hand,
a royal diadem in the hand of your God.**

**⁴ No longer will they call you Deserted,
or name your land Desolate.**

**But you will be called Hephzibah,
and your land Beulah;**

**for the Lord will take delight in you,
and your land will be married.**

**⁵ As a young man marries a young woman,
so will your Builder marry you;
as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you.**

John 2:1-11

Jesus Changes Water Into Wine

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, 2 and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

4 "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."

5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

6 Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

7 Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.

8 Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so, 9 and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside 10 and said, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.”

11 What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

SENTENCE FOR THE DAY

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Isaiah 60:1

INTRODUCTION

There is date in the liturgical calendar when the church is invited to celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord.

And the word “epiphany” comes from a Greek verb that means “to shine upon,” “to manifest,” or “to make known.”

So, the feast of the Epiphany celebrates the many ways that Christ made himself known to the world, mainly, in the three events of his mission and divinity: the visit of the Magi (Matthew 2:1-12), the baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:9-11), and curiously, if not problematically, in the miracle at Cana (John 2:1-11), which is the reading for today.

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and curiously, if not problematically, in the miracle at Cana (John 2:1-11), which is the reading for today.



So, in Epiphanytide we have a trptych or trinity of biblical events ... to guide our thinking on who Jesus is ... and his mission and ministry among us.

Do you agree with me that weddings are often accidents waiting to happen?

Something ... almost always goes wrong ... at a service of holy matrimony.

As a minister of the church, I have a handful of delightful stories ... that are mostly amusing ... including:

- weddings rings being misplaced or lost just as the service was about to begin,
- wedding festivities being foreshortened because the bride needed to go to hospital to give birth to her first child,
- a bride getting lost on her way to church - in St Margaret's Chapel in Edinburgh Castle
- the best man getting drunk and giving a less than lucid and entertaining speech,
- and sadly, the MC not preparing a speech to honour the bride and groom ... and told everyone as much.

At my own wedding, the electrical power went out due to too many kettles, electric frying pans, and the like being connected to the power sockets in the Roxburgh Hydro Hall where we gathered, just as they were cooking dinner. Charming.

Ho hum!

Well, I guess it was to be expected that something was going to go wrong at this wedding in Cana of Galilee.

You may be interested to know that in those days, the bride and groom celebrated the marriage ... not with a honeymoon ... but with a seven-day wedding feast at the groom's home.

And this particular celebration is in trouble, because the wine is running out before the party is over.

The situation constitutes a crisis for the family who shoulders the responsibility for hospitality.

It is the mother of Jesus who notices.

She observes the difficulty ... and takes action to help.

Jesus is hovering in the background ... as one who also had been invited ... and seems content to keep his distance.

When his mother tells the servants to do whatever Jesus says, Jesus performs one of his most ... understated ... mighty acts, **“Fill the jars with water.... Now draw some out and take it to the chief steward” (vv. 7–8).**

The best wine is now served ... to keep the party going.

The servants know what has happened ... the steward is amazed ... and the disciples believe in Jesus.

Well, how is that ... for a happy ending?

Are you thinking, like me that ... why on earth is this mentioned at the beginning of Jesus' ministry

... indicating something really important ... and why has the church included it as one of the three events, that reveals the glory of Christ? The epiphany.

Everyone seems to sense the joyous feast has been salvaged.

And maybe, sometimes we ...have forgotten that our Lord once attended a wedding feast ... and said yes to gladness and joy.

Prompted by his earthly mother, Jesus turned water into wine ... to point us to his heavenly Father, ... God who loves to hear the laughter of people ... celebrating and having fun. So, it could be argued God believes in partying, the title of my sermon this morning.

Do you think ... there is a possibility ... that sometimes the church ... has forgotten to live the joy ... of a partying God?

A presbyterian elder once recalled “Religion was a day and a place: religion was Sunday and the church: almost everything else was life.

Religion was a curious, quiet, and inconsequential moment in the vital existence of a country boy.

It came around every week, but it didn't seem to have much to do with the rest of my life, that is, with life.”¹

But the sign ... or miracle ...at Cana tells us that Jesus served God the Father ... who puts joy into life ... and who thinks it is worth a miracle ... to keep the party going as we celebrate.

God ... does not want our religion ... to be too holy ... so as not to be happy.

¹ James McBride Dabbs, *The Road Home* (Philadelphia: Christian Education Press, 1960), 25.

And throughout his life and his ministry, Jesus celebrated people ... people getting married, people being healed of disease ... and deformity ... people enjoying meals together.

You see, he carried a spirit of celebration with him ... wherever he went ... as he proclaimed God is one of mercy, peace and joy ... alongside being holy, just, and awesome.

So ... this joyous feast at Cana ... is a sign that we are to rejoice as the people of God ... and to toast the good life ... of love ... and of abundance ... as circumstances affords.

Alright, I have a couple of thoughts, which I would like you to ponder on this morning.

Why was Jesus
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**FIRSTLY, WHY WAS JESUS INITIALLY
HESITANT ... ALMOST UNCARING ...
ABOUT THE EMBARRASMENT CAUSED BY
THE WEDDING RUNNING OUT OF WINE?**

Even though the outcome is a miracle ...
demonstrating divine generosity ... **“filled to the
brim,”** ... this event is troubling, even scandalous.

At a deeper level, the theological stumbling block
is perhaps not so much the miracle of turning
water into wine ... but the hesitancy of Jesus
wanting to assist, he said **“What concern ... is
that ... to you ... and to me?”**

This is the scandal of divine reluctance. Why does Jesus ... God the incarnate ... pull back?

Now, of course, Jesus didn't have to perform a miracle ... when he received the urgent request from his mother. He could have attempted to offer some assistance ... I mean anything. But no, nothing.

OK ... no doubt ... we can give good reasons for Jesus' reluctance.

However, more wine at a wedding party ... that may already contain a lot of 'happy' guests ... seems frivolous given ... or uncalled for! Do you think?.

Or we may read ... this reluctance in light of the John's emphasis ... on divine control ... or perfect timing ... he said, **“my hour has not yet come.”**

You see there was a plan, and everyone must be patient as it unfolds.

Yet ... just as the mother of Jesus ... saw her son as one who could ...and should ... meet need ... so do many followers ... of Jesus today.

We see a world in need ... and we believe in one who claimed ... to bring abundant life ... to those in need.

In a world ... where for so many ... there is no clean water ... let alone fine wine ... so, we might ask, Tony, where is the extravagance of God? The God who believes in partying.

In a world where children play in bomb craters ... the size of a thirty-gallon wine barrel ... where is the miracle of divine intervention?

In a world where ... desperate mothers must say to their small children ... “We have no food,” ... why has the **“hour not yet come”**, Jesus?

And ... I am sure you will agree with me ... that no matter how we rationalise divine activity ... we still want to tug at Jesus' sleeve ... to bend his ear ...and say: **“they have no wine.”**

Well, you may think ... it seems like a travesty to turn an event about divine abundance ... into a trial of God ... and yet, it is passages like this one ... about divine extravagance ... that make God's absence ... in the face of poverty ... suffering ... and evil ... stand out ... don't you think?

How do we reconcile a story of potent generosity ... and a call to party ... with a world of tremendous need?

So, if God is both generous and able, then does God also express Jesus' attitude: **what is that to me?**

Alright, now this is a gnarly and scandalous matter ... to unpick this morning.

And a possible way forward is ... that we trust that God ... who wants abundance and a festive attitude to life ... means that we also follow in the footsteps of the mother of Jesus ... by prodding God ... for divine intervention ... for compassion ... and for generosity.

Followers of Christ ... are partners of the divine ... in alleviating human need.

But the reluctance of Jesus in this story is only half the scandal.

Here is the rest of it: ... the mother of Jesus (and she is never named in the Gospel of John) ... is a catalyst ... to Jesus' ... extravagant generosity.

I say it again ... the mother of Jesus is a catalyst to Jesus' action.

“They have no wine.”

“What concern is that to you and to me?”

“Do whatever he tells you.”

“Fill the jars with water.”

The text will not let go ... of Mary's persistence in changing Jesus' mind.

And the prodding of the mother of Jesus ... today ... through your voice and mine ... endures, still.

You will not be surprised that theologians have attempted to justify ... God's goodness ... in the face of suffering and evil ... and have come ... to various conclusions.

It is called "the question of theodicy" ... which concerns the ... vindication of divine providence ... with the existence of evil.

Some say:

- that it is not yet God's hour

- others say God relies on human compassion to do the will of God
- still others argue that God continues to need people ... like Jesus' mother ... to go on pleading for divine intervention

Now, there is a very moving moment in [Toni Morrison's masterpiece Beloved](#), when a white girl named Amy Denver helps ... a pregnant black woman Sethe ... as she escapes slavery.

Seeing Sethe's ... bloody back ... torn by the whip ... and astonished by the degree of her mutilation, Amy says, **“Come here Jesus ... I wonder what God had in mind.”**²

In John's Gospel chapter 2, however, we see what God has in mind ... abundance,

... and the mother of Jesus ... nudges us to ask ... what God had in mind ... during slavery, the Holocaust, genocide in the Balkans, unimaginable

² Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 81.

suffering in other war zones, famines, natural disasters, political tyranny, and so.

And Amy Denver ... does here what the mother of Jesus did in John chapter 2 ... she poses the question ... and nudges the Divine.

So, this troubling text ... and somewhat scandalous text ... invites us to trust ... in God's generosity and abundance.

And we ... like the perceptive mother of Jesus ... should nudge God ... with our observation of those things that concern or trouble us ... and say **they have no wine.**

So, Mary, therefore, becomes an exemplar for us today.

We notice the
dramatic
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event



SECONDLY, WE NOTICE THE DRAMATIC SYMBOLISM OF THIS HISTORIC EVENT

You see, the account of the wedding at Cana is not a simple tale of a miracle ... revealing Jesus' supernatural power ... of turning water into wine ... framed within a happy family wedding.

A deeper, more symbolic meaning, catches our attention.

You see, in this event, we need to notice ... the identity of Jesus ... and his ministry ... are introduced with important symbols:

- a joyous wedding,
- six Jewish ritual barrels,
- thirsty wedding guests,
- and an abundance of wine.

So, Jesus' ministry begins in a blissful setting ... of great joy ... and abundance ... in a seemingly insignificant place called Cana.

Cana, you may be interested to know ... is less than ten miles north of Nazareth ... and is not mentioned in the New Testament ... except in John's Gospel.

Yet it becomes the site of Jesus' first miracle.

This important section (chaps 2 - 4) begins in Cana and ends in Cana (4:46), forming an

interesting narrative, surrounding a seemingly insignificant city.

In chapters 2 – 4 ... with the village of Cana as bookends ... Jesus:

- turns water into wine,
- explains that his body is the new temple (2:13–25),
- challenges Nicodemus to be born from above, to be born again (3:1–21),
- offers living water to an unnamed woman at a well (4:1–45),
- and returns to Cana to give life to the son of a royal official (4:46–54).

And symbols such as water, temple, wind, birth, and old wells ... are given new meaning ... as Jesus proclaims his life-giving powers.

I believe, the symbols of the wedding feast reveal the old religion ... lacked hospitality and life.

Six water barrels, used for ritual cleansing, are available. These are not just simple barrels.

These are symbols that point to the emptiness of the traditional religion. The six barrels, while used for religious purposes, are still not complete.

The barrels contain only water for washing. Soon ... Jesus will fill them with new wine, which, as already mentioned, is a rich symbol ... in biblical tradition ... indicating prosperity, abundance, and good times.

So, changing the barrels of water ... into barrels over-flowing with good wine ... becomes a metaphor for Jesus' ministry ... as he brings vitality to the ancient religion.

And the abundance of good wine is a shock ... to the wine steward ... as perhaps indeed the complexity and wonder of this miracle ... is a shock to us today.

And, now, drawing my sermon to a close, I note that John chapter 2 verse 11 clearly states the

purpose of this miracle, **“What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”**

So, can you let your imagination be filled with the divine image of Jesus' face ... reflected in the pools of flowing wine ... poured out for the laughing ... happy ... wedding guests ... who were present to celebrate life.

And in those same barrels of wine, the faces of the believing disciples are also seen ... because they came to “believe in him” (2:11).

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And in those same barrels of wine, the faces of the believing disciples are also seen ... because they came to “believe in him” (2:11).

And if your imagination was filled with these images ... then you will ... I suspect ... begin to understand the meaning of this particular miracle.

AMEN