

Sermon: 3rd Sunday of Epiphany: “*They have no wine*”.

Revd Dr Sean Cathie

Last week we reflected on angels as messengers between heaven and earth and on the times or places when human lives are touched by messengers from heaven. Today, our readings give us another sign of the meeting of earth and heaven with images of weddings. We revisit the familiar story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee in the light of another story, telling of the marriage of the Lamb and declaring that those invited to that wedding supper will be blessed. With the chorus sounding like an ocean, this is a vision of a cosmic Hallelujah celebrating the marriage of the Lamb whose “bride has made herself ready and (she is) clothed in fine linen which is the righteous deeds of the saints...” This glorious image beckons us forward - it reflects we might say, the glorious joining together of Christ with his Church. St John is so impressed by the angelic messenger that he “fell down at his feet to worship him.” But the angel says, “You must not do that, I am a fellow-servant with you and your comrades.” In other words, we too are messengers of God, witnessing by our lives to the joining of heaven and earth.

We may want to disown such a suggestion - knowing too well our weaknesses and failings. We may feel more at ease identifying with the wedding guests whose wine had run out. Is this not a good image for how we sometimes feel? As followers of our Lord, we are part of the wedding feast but the wine has run out, the bubbles have lost their fizz, and the meeting of heaven and earth is but a memory, but not a living, fizzing presence. We try to keep it alive, by holding on to whatever carries our own memory of such moments.

Perhaps we nurse a nostalgia for those exciting, beginning times, and think resignedly that they are in the past and we should be grateful for what we have. Which brings me to Mary’s place in this story. Certainly she knew what it was to be disturbed by the visit of the angel. Were the guests resigned to the fact that the wine had run out? If so, Mary was not among them. At the risk of stating the obvious, she says to Jesus, “they have no wine.”

Sometimes it’s the obvious that needs to be said. How often I have sat in a meeting which is ignoring something that seems obvious, except that no one mentions it . . . What a relief it is, when someone eventually does! How the energy level changes to something more lively and the group becomes focused and engaged.

And that is one way we could describe Jesus, focused and engaged in all the many meetings and dialogues we hear about. The heavenly voice, that declared Jesus to be beloved of God, points us to the source of his energy and purpose, to the love between him and his Father.

This has implications, not only for us as individuals but also for this fellowship of those who love and follow Jesus. One obvious thing that we seldom discuss, but which I'm reminded of by the image of the wine running out, is the decline in the numbers of those who identify as Christian and attend worship. It's a worry for some, a cause for lament for others. It's a long-term trend throughout the West, not just in England. Small wonder that the Church has lost its fizz. The bishop's response has been to call on parishes to do 'one new thing'. When it's a struggle to keep the show on the road, this can feel beyond us- even before the pandemic. I'm tempted to say, someone should tell him, 'the wine has run out'. And I can imagine that like Mary but not like her, he might suggest we do what she did and turn to Jesus and say the obvious. Yet it is sometimes very hard to speak of the obvious because we feel bad about it. And yet, it is as we do so, that something is opened up and fresh energy and possibilities become available. Jesus' instruction to fill the jars with water in connection with ourselves as a community makes me think of those moments in discussion when something fresh and real comes in. The walkers among you will know how refreshing the water from a stream on the hills or mountains can taste - that's a good image for the freshness and liveliness that comes when we listen to new voices or let ourselves say the things we think and feel but usually keep to ourselves. It would be easy for us to place all responsibility for this on the new vicar for whom we all wait, and have to do so for a bit longer. That would be a bit like St John falling in worship before the angel messenger. We are fellow-servants and comrades, and it is when we speak afresh and listen afresh, that something transformative happens.

Filling the jars with water was not an obvious thing to do The moment of the wine running out is a good metaphor for when we feel empty. This is often the moment when Jesus comes into our lives... Not that this is the end of the problem. There was action to be taken- fill the jars with water. This suggests that heaven and earth will touch with some do-able action like filling the jars - they represent the old, familiar ways of preparing to meet God. We too have our long-familiar traditions and I fear that they too have run out of wine. Perhaps the way to the fizz of the wedding supper is to do what we do, but to fill them with water. I think of this in terms of saying & doing these familiar things but with fresh attention and concentration

That is, not with something we do not have, but with what is naturally lying to hand. Water refreshes and cleanses, andImagine that we as a church could drink such water and be refreshed and enlivened by it ... At any rate the bride of the Lamb 'is dressed in the deeds of the saints' - it is then our deeds - the actions that we take, that the miracle of the new life, when earth meets heaven, begins.