

Parish of Central Exeter

3rd Sunday of Epiphany

24 January 2021

Seeing God in the ordinary, believing in transformation.

Welcome everyone.



Our reflections this morning are by Sheila and the intercessions provided by Helen. Many thanks to you both.

We are still in the season of Epiphany, the manifestation of Christ to the whole world. Our Gospel reading and reflections today consider the transformation of water into wine at a wedding in Cana, - the first of seven signs that John includes in his Gospel to demonstrate Jesus's divine status.

Call to Worship

Arise, shine; for your light has come!

God's glory has risen upon us.

Despite the state of this world:

Despite illness, despite fear;

Despite disappointment, despite injustice;

Despite sadness, despite violence;

Despite grief, and despite despair—

God's glory will appear over us.

Lift up your eyes and look around:

See the light of God's hope, the light of God's peace,

the light of God's joy, the light of God's love.

See the light of God's healing for us, for our community, for our world.

Let us lift up our eyes and look around.

Then we shall see and be radiant,

our hearts shall thrill and rejoice.

Gathering Hymn

'Jesus calls us here to meet him.' From the Upper Clyde Parish Church Dunfermline. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ModYoPReYYw>

We Say

Dear Lord,
Help me to expect miracles.
Help me to get past the borders of my eyes,
the roadblocks of my mind,
the narrow door of my heart.

May my soul embrace
the mystery of Your magnificent love!

May my heart rejoice
over the unexpected and undefined!

May my mind and body sigh
with the sheer awe of it all. Amen.

(written by Leonard Sweet, posted on Preach the Story. <https://preachthestory.com/>)

Confession (silence)

In the stopping
in the pausing
in the quiet
we cannot avoid
what we are not

Our faults
our lack of faith
our lack of vision and of action
our lack of trust in You –
all bubble to the surface.

You, Father God,
see what we are
and still stand by us
offering us hope
and above all,
forgiveness.

Help us here
Help us now –
to recognise
that it was with us in mind
that You sent Jesus to be born in our world.



It was with us in mind
that He grew to live and die
and to rise again
Because that's what You think
we are worth.

May Your love set us free
this day and always –
these things we ask
in the name of that Son,
whose praise we sing.

(written by Christian Aid Scotland)

Collect for the third Sunday of Epiphany

Almighty God,
whose Son revealed in signs and miracles
the wonder of your saving presence:
renew your people with your heavenly grace,
and in all our weakness
sustain us by your mighty power;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Worship song

'Jesus where'er thy people meet.' Words are by William Cowper, written in 1769, set to the tune Wareham. Sung for us by the St Michael Singers. Words are on the screen.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AK1sN_vjbw

Readings

Revelation 19:6-10

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunder-peals, crying out,

'Hallelujah!
For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and exult

and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;
to her it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure' —
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

And the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' And he said to me, 'These are true words of God.' Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, 'You must not do that! I am a fellow-servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.'

John 2:1-11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.'

And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it.

When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.'

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Reflection

Today we have this very familiar story from John's gospel which can be read on many levels symbolically. I want to reflect first with the theme of 'seeing' that we considered last week. Then I will use ideas derived from two books in Averil's library - Richard Burrige's 'John, The People's Bible Commentary' and Ann Lewin's 'Come Emmanuel'.

First, we consider each of the characters in the story and what they saw, remembering that wedding celebrations often continued over a few days, so lack of wine could be a major social embarrassment.

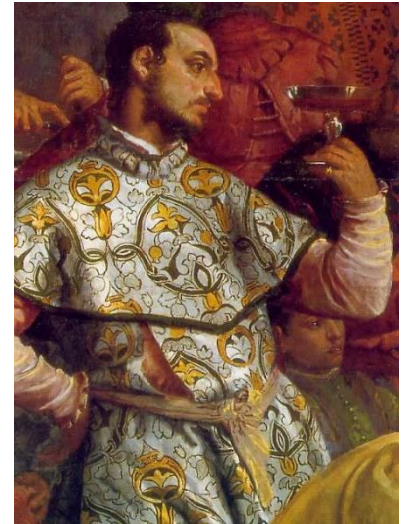
Mary – she sees the problem and sees the solution in her son. She doesn't give up when it seems that Jesus is not going to act but persists by directing the servants to obey Jesus.

Servants – obey apparently pointless commands from this guest. Have they seen something about his character which perhaps encourages them, or heard stories about him? Or, perhaps more likely, as servants they simply have no choice; but it would be hard work to fill the large jars with water.

Steward - sees (and tastes) the excellent and abundant wine.

Bridegroom and guests – see and enjoy the quality wine.

Servants, disciples and Mary – see the transformation of water to wine and, at least for the disciples and Mary, this leads to a growth in their faith and understanding of Jesus and so they continue to follow him.



Ann Lewin begins her commentary on this passage by quoting a line which was in last Sunday's collect, linking this with how we grow in faith as we pray to God to 'transform the poverty of our natures by the riches of your grace.' She discusses the obedience of the servants to a simple command and concludes with the following paragraph and a poem from her 'Watching for the Kingfisher' collection.

'This event tells us what a difference Jesus can make to our ordinary everyday experience if we let him work in us, not just in personal terms but in social terms as well. God's grace is an incredibly generous gift, but we have to be open enough to receive it. We have to be willing to share it too, because like all God's gifts it only reaches its full potential when everyone has their share. God offers us the riches of the wine of new life. We turn it back to water again when we refuse to believe that things can be different: when we let injustice continue, or are careless of human life.'

Cana revisited

Can you make wine of this?

Routine of work, or lack of it;
Relationships or broken-heartedness;
Struggle to tease out meaning in the dark;
Can these be changed?

If ordinary existence
Is poured out to be used,
Could you perform
Another miracle?

Perhaps the wonder is, being faithless,

We turn the wine of our potential to
Plain water.

In The People's Bible Commentary, which describes itself as a "Bible commentary for every day", Richard Burridge covers this passage over two days. Regarding the first 8 verses he also comments on the persistence of faith in Mary and the obedience of the servants before concluding with this prayer.

'Lord, when resources run out and things seem hopeless,
grant me the faith to trust in you
and the willingness to do whatever you say,
that your abundance may be shed in the world.' (p47)

Then his conclusion for verses 9-11 is this:

'What are the 'signs' around you where God is changing the ordinary things of life into the new wine of his kingdom?

Lord, thank you that you have kept the best until now,
grant me insight to see your signs
and courage to believe in you.' (p49)

I personally find it easier to say the first of these two prayers than to say the second. Considering the state of the world, it is hard to believe that God has 'kept the best until now'. Yet there are many signs of God's love, grace, and generosity at work through the compassion, creativity, and skills of so many people. Perhaps I just need more courage, faith, and trust in God.

Prayer

Holy One,

I give you thanks for the water turned to wine,
For the miracle that allows the party to continue,
For Jesus' first sign
Which is not a disease healed, not a prejudice corrected, not an authority challenged
—he will get there—You will get there—
But first it is the wine
First it is sympathy for the hosts,
deference to your mother,
consideration of your friends,
And maybe, partly, your own desire
For a glass of the good stuff,

For the music and laughter to continue awhile longer,
For the warm glow of a good party.
God, I feel, sometimes, the burden

Of needing to ask for and participating in the BIG miracles–
The transformations of lives and systems–
Which we so desperately need.
I feel, sometimes, a guilt
in asking for smaller things, personal favours,
for moments of ease or lightness or joy that seem frivolous at best.
And yet, here you are,
In the beginning
Giving us wine and laughter and music,
A frivolous miracle that lifts the burden,
if only for a time.
So I give you thanks.
Amen. *(From Revgalsblogpals)*



Affirmation of Faith

We believe transformation is a gift from God
which is never complete
and longs to be set free in us.

Celebration

I thought it would be worth while to catch a glimpse of the celebrations at a modern Jewish wedding.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KTEQmJCT6k>

Intercessions

Lord, you transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. Take the ordinary human institution of our Church and help us understand our nature as a community of pilgrims inspired by you. Grace our Diocesan and national leaders with the gift of wielding human authority wisely and the humility to follow you as disciples. Be with them and with us as we all navigate these bewildering times.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Lord, you transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. As a species we have been busy transforming your extraordinary creation into the ordinary commodities that enable us to live lives of excessive comfort. And as a species we have been busy transforming your extraordinary gift of community into self-interest and conflict. Grace our political and business leaders – and grace us – with a vision of the common good and the good of your creation. Guide us all as we seek to move through, and build back after, the disruptions of this pandemic. May we seize the opportunity to build back better.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Lord, you transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. Central Exeter will not be the same when the pandemic is brought under control. Help us as a church community to see the city's needs clearly and respond appropriately. We think especially of _____.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Lord, you transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. We remember with gratitude all those ordinary people – hospital cleaners and porters, doctors, nurses, ambulance crews, police officers, shop workers, hauliers, council workers and more – whose extraordinary efforts in their everyday work are protecting us, easing suffering and saving life. Give them strength and comfort. We pray for anyone who is finding this lockdown hard. In the face of separations, illnesses, and deaths, we ask you to be with those who are suffering, to give them a glimpse of the extraordinary promise of resurrection joy. We pray for all who have died and for the bereaved who mourn them. And we remember especially _____.

Lord of life,
in this time of crisis for our families and communities, our nation and our world,
we turn to you in faith, to seek your guidance and receive your blessing,
knowing that nothing in all creation can separate us from your love
made known to us in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
We ask this in the name of him who suffered the cross and rose again triumphant,
for he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
ever one God, world without end.

Amen

The Peace

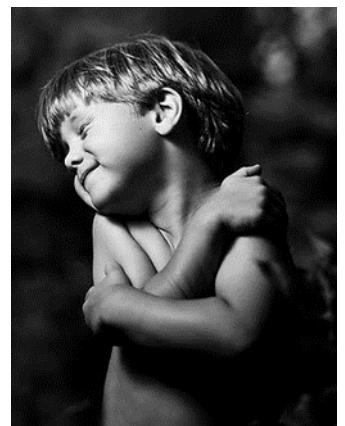
If alone, smile and hug yourself (God does). If otherwise, share the Peace as appropriate.

A short Spiritual Communion

The Book of Common Prayer reminds us that if we offer ourselves in penitence and faith, giving thanks for the redemption won by Christ crucified, we may truly 'eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ', even when we cannot receive the sacrament physically in ourselves.

Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

O God,
help me to trust you,
help me to know that you are with me,



help me to believe that nothing
can separate me from your love
revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

An offertory prayer

We may not be in church, but we can still offer ourselves and our talents to God.

Blessed are you, God and creator of the universe,
as we offer you our activities, thanksgivings and our life.
We present ourselves, and our world, as we are and as you can make us,
for everything in heaven and on earth is yours,
and of your own do we give you. Blessed be God for ever.

*As we prepare for communion you might like to listen to Nigel and St David's Choir singing
'Wait for the Lord.'*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M89oWjtOk&feature=youtu.be>



*Because there is no Breaking and Sharing we can
have only Spiritual Communion with Christ. I'm
sure you can find a way to use a few minutes of
silence or conversation to enjoy this, and make it
a sacramental moment.*

*Giving thanks for Christ's death and resurrection
you may wish to say*

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

Post Communion Collect

Almighty Father,
whose Son our Saviour Jesus Christ is the light of the world:
may your people,
illuminated by your word and sacraments,
shine with the radiance of his glory,

that he may be known, worshipped, and obeyed
to the ends of the earth;
for he is alive and reigns, now and for ever.

Commission & Benediction

Go now, and live as one body in Christ.
Be at peace, and care for one another;
Suffer with one another and rejoice with one another.
Give your attention to the Word of God
and proclaim the good news of freedom to all.

And may God delight your heart and sharpen your vision;
May Christ Jesus keep you, thought and word, in his grace;
And may the Holy Spirit be the fountain that sustains you all
.....and binds you together as one.

(Nathan Nettleton www.laughingbird.net)

May the blessing of God fall on our community,
May it be a safe place,
full of understanding and acceptance,
where you can be as you are,
without the need of any mask
or pretense or image.

Amen.

(posted on Third Space. <http://third-space.org.uk/>)

Closing Music

‘Lord of the Church, we pray for our renewing.’ This is by far the best version I have found on You Tube. The words are below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mouj27bFBhk>

Lord of the church, we pray for our renewing:
Christ over all, our undivided aim.
Fire of the Spirit, burn for our enduing,
wind of the Spirit, fan the living flame!
We turn to Christ amid our fear and failing,
the will that lacks the courage to be free,
the weary labours, all but unavailing,
to bring us nearer what a church should be.

Lord of the church, we seek a Father's blessing,
a true repentance and a faith restored,
a swift obedience and a new possessing,
filled with the Holy Spirit of the Lord!
We turn to Christ from all our restless striving,
unnumbered voices with a single prayer:
the living water for our souls' reviving,
in Christ to live, and love and serve and care.

Lord of the church, we long for our uniting,
true to one calling, by one vision stirred;
one cross proclaiming and one creed reciting,
one in the truth of Jesus and his word.
So lead us on; till toil and trouble ended,
one church triumphant one new song shall sing,
to praise his glory, risen and ascended,
Christ over all, the everlasting King!



Scroll down for Coffee Break

Coffee Break

Nigel kindly sent us this photo of wine opportunities at Cana today.



(The impression I have gathered from visitors is that one glass of Cana wine is enough of an experience to last a lifetime!)

But where is Cana exactly? Most tourists are taken to Kefr Kenna near Nazareth on the road to Tiberias, where the site is maintained by the Franciscans. The problem is that this location has no Roman-period ruins and unlikely to be the place mentioned in the New Testament. Its veneration began sometime in the Middle Ages.



An alternative site, Khirbet Qana, is 8 miles northwest of Nazareth and 12 miles west of the Sea of Galilee. It is high on a hill overlooking the Bet Netofa valley. This location has much more evidence in its favour. Excavations have uncovered Second Temple period tombs, houses and possibly a synagogue or Byzantine church. Evidence of Christian veneration at this site dates back to the sixth century C.E.

Photo shows remains of the possible church.

Scroll down for night prayer

Night Prayer

3rd Sunday of Epiphany
24 January 2021

Return to Cana

Preparation

Jesus...

You are God's Son shining in the
heavens
I smile in your light

Jesus...

You are my Bridegroom coming for me
I hold you in my heart

Jesus...

You are my Champion rejoicing to run your course
I follow you

Jesus...

You are God's Law restoring souls
I study and obey you

Jesus...

You are more precious than gold
I give up all for you

Jesus...

You are sweeter than honey
I delight in you

Jesus...

You are God's Word to me
I love to speak your name

*(written by Bill & Kristi Gaultiere, inspired by Psalm 19. Posted on Soul Shepherding.
<http://www.soulshepherding.org/>)*

Silence

Hymn

'Master speak thy servant heareth' – a reminder of last weeks reading about the call of Samuel, but just as appropriate tonight. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=raPJHiezEhw>



*If you are able to do so, you might wish
to light a candle near a window.*

Confession

God of shadows and light,
God of hiddenness and revelation,
Forgive us when we miss you—
when we overlook the love,
when we turn our backs on the hope,
when we gaze too intently at ourselves
ignoring the blessed others that surround us.
Forgive us, God, and in your infinite grace
shine your holy light
or perhaps sit with us in the dark.

Return to Cana: Things to think about.

Don't Panic!

Make no mistake. This was a crisis moment. As Sheila indicated this morning, a wedding feast lasted several days. For crucial supplies to run out would have bought shame and dishonour on the family, and must be dealt with before guests discover for themselves. Since Mary is aware of the problem we might assume that she is involved in some way in the organisation of the celebrations, which would indicate she had a family connection to the groom. It has been suggested that it even could be one of Jesus's brothers, although there is no proof. But action has to be taken, and she seems to have the belief that her son is able to do something, although we are not told how that faith has come about. She has enough authority on the scene – surely beyond that of an ordinary guest - to tell the servants to do what Jesus says.

'Your mother
smiled at You.

It had begun:
water and wine.

But did she see
where it would end?
Or did she
just see You
as her son?'

From Cana Wedding by Terry Collett

Crisis management requires hard work

Whether you measure their capacity in litres or gallons, these stone jars are going to be heavy when empty, and impossible to lift when full. There is no handy tap or hosepipe to fill them with water, so they have to be filled by hand from smaller containers filled from a well or cistern. That will take time and effort. Having given his instructions, which must have seemed bizarre to the servants to say the least, did Jesus join in with the process, or just watch?

Remember too that like most good crisis management it must take place behind the scenes. Even the steward is unaware of what is going on. The result is a moment of triumph, but the person who has resolved the crisis has to remain unrecognised.

The Cana Couple Reminisce

That was only the beginning:
Ached and awkward we were then,
Embarrassed enough without the wine incident,
Indebted to Mary's son for flow of joy.

Ever since it has been miracle:
Touching the shoreline of the other in our sleep,
Waking warm beneath our roof,
Hoeing the wheat shoots in our fields.

Even the threats brought blessing:
Brooding death intensified our life,
Illness taught nurture of cherished child,
The needy repaid us with Cana's own poor gold.

Our union was not singular; we fought
And sulked, sickened like the other folk.
But in every glass of common water,
We tasted hints of garnet-gold.

Kathy Coffey

Veronese's perspective

Let's take a moment to look at the painting of the incident by Veronese. It was commissioned by the Benedictine Monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, Italy, and completed in 1563. It hung in the refectory of the monastery for 235 years, until it was plundered by Napoléon in 1797, and shipped to Paris, where it now hangs in the Louvre.

The monks would see this painting at least three times every day when they ate together. Seated at their tables it would seem as if they were part of the same event. The 'head-table' at the wedding is the one on the left, but in the refectory our attention is on Jesus' table where he is in the middle.



It's hard to work out what the monks felt as they sat in silence in their austere robes, spectators if not participants in this feast. Even though the people in the picture are not speaking, there is an animation, colour and vibrancy that must have been in stark contrast to their own experience at their end of the table. Perhaps it provided a transformation from their everyday into a different world, but one where Jesus was in control. Perhaps they took comfort from the impassive look of Jesus as he looks out at the viewer – the only person in the picture to do so.

But familiarity breeds contempt we are told. After a while did the monks no longer think about all the rich symbolism that is included in the painting (no space here to introduce it all), because it had become the standard backdrop to their communal meal. Did they too find the truth of the last words of the poem 'Cana Revisited' in Sheila's reflections this morning:

We turn the wine of our potential to
Plain water.

Worship Music

We are now going to share some of the experiences of the monks at San Giorgio through this video of Gregorian chant. Their world was quite different from that depicted by Veronese in his painting, and I think the pictures here and the singing helps us to appreciate the gap.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBwh1OXw6uI>

Closing Prayer

As we journey through our own winters
O Christ of the North:

Keep vigil with us as we bear the harsh, cold times of our lives.
Wrap us in cloaks of clarity and strength
when the strong, north winds of challenge blow around us.
Help us to remember to call upon your many blessings
for our endurance and creativity.
Keep us in honesty and truth
with the remembrance of your faithfulness even unto crucifixion.

O Christ of the North, guardian of us all,
we call upon you. Amen.

*(adapted from "Invocation to the Christ of the Four Directions" written by Suzanne Fageol.
Posted on the Weekly Worship site of Christian Aid.)*

Blessing

The Buddha's Sermon at Rajagaha, a universal Buddhist wedding blessing, is read as follows:

"Do not deceive, do not despise each other anywhere. Do not be angry nor bear secret resentments; for as a mother will risk her life and watches over her child, so boundless be your love to all, so tender, kind and mild.

Cherish goodwill right and left, early and late, and without hindrance, without stint, be free of hate and envy, while standing and walking and sitting down, whatever you have in mind, the rule of life that is always best is to be loving-kind.”



Wedding at Cana by He Qi

Closing music

Forget the austere world of the monastery! Let's go Bollywood and party for what they claim to be the wedding hit of 2016.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s05KApAW6kE>

Thanks

Thanks to everyone who has participated, especially Sheila for this morning's reflection, and Helen for the intercessions. Material taken or adapted from other websites has an attribution made where possible.



San Giorgio Church Venice. The monastery building is still here on the right. Although no longer a monastery, the refectory has been restored with a full-size digital reproduction of Veronese's painting in its original place.