

Isaiah 62:1-5
Psalm 36:5-10
1 Corinthians 12:1-11
John 2:1-11
Epiphany 2
Year C
19th January 2025
Great St Mary's

Benjamin Franklin, the American polymath, was a connoisseur of French wine. Given that he died from obesity, he may have overindulged his passion. But he believed that the production of wine was a gift of God:

"We hear of the conversion of water into wine at the marriage in Cana as of a miracle. But this conversion is, through the goodness of God, made every day before our eyes. Behold the rain which descends from heaven upon our vineyards, there it enters the roots of the vines, to be changed into wine, a constant proof that God loves us, and loves to see us happy."

In these weeks of Epiphany, we are called to look with fresh eyes at Jesus' revealing of himself as God. Although this year most of our gospel readings are from Luke, today we are at the beginning of John's gospel. (Because this story doesn't appear in Luke).

Jesus is at a wedding with his family and his friends. And the most embarrassing thing happens: the wine runs out. Jesus' mother finds an unlikely solution: ask Jesus to say a few words and turn the water into wine. Jesus appears reluctant: "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come!" But his mother ignores him and simply instructs the servants to do as he tells them.

It's a story that is probably familiar to us. We know how it will end. Jesus instructs them to bring him the water used for purification (over 100 gallons!) They fill the jars with water and - hey presto! The couple's embarrassment is saved. The party can continue.

There are so many ways of understanding this story.

I remember my Sunday school teacher telling us that it showed that Jesus liked a good party. Which struck me as a good thing. In a day when Christians are sometimes thought of as being killjoys, more concerned with telling people what not to do, rather than how to live a happy life, that's as good a message as any to take from it.

There are others.

To provide some kind of balance, there are many verses in the Bible which counsel against drunkenness. Certain people in the Bible are required to abstain altogether. Kings, because it might impair their judgement. Priests - but only whilst on duty. And then those who elect to abstain for a period of time, who are called Nazirites.

Often, wine is used as a metaphor for celebration and joy. A land in which there will be plentiful wine is a sign of a blessing.

But wine is also used as a metaphor for judgement. To understand this, we have to understand how wine is produced. Grapes are grown and harvested, then pressed in a winepress (or trodden) and then the wine is left to ferment. The wine depends on the grapes. Good grapes yield good wine, bad grapes yield bad wine. But it isn't just luck or chance. How the grapes are tended will affect how they grow. There's a lot of work in getting the grapes to grow well. But the final judgement of the wine is in the tasting. And so the prophets used this image - very familiar to God's people, who grew lots of vines - to illustrate God's judgement. nA English equivalent idea might be: the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Or: you make your bed and lie in it. This is a similar idea. You grow your grapes, and the judgement is in the drinking of it. Therefore if your deeds are good, you will be found to be good and judged well for it. If your deeds are evil, then you will found to have done evil, and will be judged for it.

Our Old Testament reading this morning, however, doesn't mention judgement. God's people are not in need of that. It follows on a bit later from the reading we had last week. God's have returned from exile to their ruined land. They don't need judgement: that's already happened. Their city, their temple, their freedom have all been destroyed. Returning home, they see the scale of the devastation wrought by a war. In order to rebuild their lives, what they need is encouragement. And the reading from Isaiah promises that.

The prophet Isaiah is bursting with good news: "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest". There is good news for Jerusalem. "Her vindication will shine out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch".

And she will be given a new name. Hepzibah. Which, in Hebrew, means: "My Delight is in Her". And "Beulah", which means: "Married".

What this means for Jerusalem is that she will no longer be outcast and away from God. For the one who will be united with her again is God himself.

This image would have been familiar to Jesus' listeners. They would have known that God promised to reunite himself with his people in the image of a wedding with his bride, Israel.

So when Jesus is at a wedding, this is the perfect setting. The perfect way to reveal that he is the one who will reunite God with his people. This is indeed cause for celebration. And what he will do is make wine out of the ordinary things.

He will turn water into wine. He will turn five loaves and fish into a feast. He will turn an empty sea into a fish fest.

And he does the same with you and me. He takes the most ordinary people and makes them extraordinary. As our epistle reminds us, through God's Holy Spirit, ordinary people become extraordinarily wise. Extraordinarily full of knowledge. Extraordinarily faithful. Extraordinarily healing. Extraordinarily discerning. They work miracles. They prophesy. They interpret each other. God's Holy Spirit makes everything different.

This morning, we take bread and wine. (Not enough to constitute any threat to our health). And they become extraordinary. This small miracle is no less extraordinary for being done each week. For each week, in this place, and throughout the world, God's people - you and me among them - are made extraordinary through these ordinary things.

There are times when music and poetry convey truth in ways that prose alone cannot. Our communion anthem illustrates this beautifully. Both the words and the music are written by Thomas Allain, who will celebrate his 60th birthday this year. It is a most extraordinary piece, which was written for a wedding. As with all the best poetry, the meaning of the text is something which rewards greater contemplation.

As Cana's quiet, wondrous guest,
Drew richest wine from water bless'd;
Through trembling vow and thankful song.
May glory shine,
As hearts respond
To Heav'n's theme,
With love,
Earth's antiphon.

After you have received bread and wine, or a blessing, and then listen to – or indeed sing – this extraordinary piece this morning, I pray that you may experience deep down something of the mystery of God's glory. That, deep down in your being, will grow, as the harmony builds, an epiphany; a moment of truth. A revelational understanding that will change you. That God takes ordinary bread, wine, words, and music and transforms them into sheer glory. May it summon from us all an antiphon – a prayerful response - of love.