**EPIPHANY 3 Sunday 24th January 2021**

**Sermon by Edward Dowler – Archdeacon of Hastings**

Three years ago, in the days when we were allowed to do such things, I visited the monastery of San Marco in Florence. It contains many works by the early Renaissance painter known as Fra Angelico (1395-1455). One of my favourite exhibits was a wooden door to the silver safe in the convent which he had decorated. He divided the door into squares, and in each square he exquisitely painted a different scene from the life of Christ, each glossed with a biblical text.

I was particularly moved by the way that Fra Angelico links Jesus’s first miracle: the wedding at Cana in Galilee, which is our gospel reading today, with a verse from the Psalms: ‘The voice of the Lord is upon the waters’ (Ps 29.3). It is as if he imagined Jesus’s voice quietly sounding over the waters at the wedding feast, so as to make what is estimated to be about 520 litres of wine, or if you prefer about 58 cases.

It’s easy to think of water as just ordinary and boring. I remember my father being horrified to report that on a summer visit to Australia, he had been, as he put it, ‘reduced to drinking water’. But when we think further, there’s actually nothing boring about water: it is a wonderful and precious gift that above all other things is necessary to sustain and nurture life; indeed it’s the most plentiful component in the human body. ‘Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,’ wrote St Francis, in his *Canticle of the Sun*, ‘which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste’.

One of church fathers remarks that Jesus himself was ‘never without the sign of water’, from his baptism in the Jordan, to his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, to his washing the feet of the disciples, to the water that flowed out of his side at the crucifixion: water is often so central to his life and teaching; to what he says and does.

In our gospel reading, St John tells us that the six stone jars full of water at the wedding were for full of water to be used for Jewish rites of purification. So the water has an important purpose, which was and is central to religious practice and indeed to daily life: we all need to wash. But however much we wash, however much we keep ourselves clean in ceremonies of ritual purification, it is not really enough to make us capable of relationship with God. In order for that to happen our own efforts – the water that we are able to supply – needs to be met by the wine – the abundant gift of God.[[1]](#footnote-1)

When Jesus turns the water into wine, he doesn’t obliterate the water in the water jars: he doesn’t throw it down the drain and begin again. But what he does is to change it and bring it to a new level. At Cana, water, which is precious and valuable in itself, is now, by Christ’s word of power and by the action of the Holy Spirit given a whole new dimension. You could never have wine without water, but in the transformation into wine, the water is given new depth and richness. In the Bible, wine has the special quality of a gift: it’s a sign of the abundant life of the Kingdom of God.

A rather similar point can perhaps be made in relation to the Eucharist or communion service. A fourth century writer called Gaudentius of Brescia wrote that ‘he who has made wine from water has also made his blood from wine’. Parallels have often been drawn between the way in which Jesus transforms water into wine at the wedding at Cana, and the way in which the bread and wine become his body and blood in the Eucharist.

There is some rather complicated and sometimes contentious stuff here. But the key point is that just as at the wedding feast, the wonderful gift of water is not just destroyed, and replaced by something different – wine. So, at the Eucharist, the wonderful gift of wine is not simply annihilated and replaced by something different – the blood of Christ. When Christ’s voice sounds upon the wine: ‘This is my blood’, this substance which is *already* a wonderful gift of God, and a potent sign of his Kingdom is not destroyed but transformed. The wine remains wine in its physical reality but it now takes on a new dimension as not just a sign of God’s kingdom but a real participation in that Kingdom through the blood of Christ.

I’d finally like to draw from this two points about the wonder of what theologians call nature and grace.

Jesus’s sign at Cana in Galilee perhaps first challenges us to see the wonder in those things that are *normal and ordinary*. Just as the water at Cana is not *just* water, but already before Jesus ever does anything, is God’s amazing gift, capable of washing us, reviving and sustaining us. So, in the same way, we can be alive to the extraordinary grace that is *already* contained in things that are *naturally part of our lives*; the things, and indeed the people that are around us. They seem just normal and everyday and, like water, we might be tempted to take for granted. But they are themselves a wonderful gift.

Secondly, the wedding at Cana teaches us to see how amazing is God’s grace and the sign of his Kingdom: that which is represented by the wine that Jesus makes. As at Cana, such overflowing grace does not destroy what was already there. Rather, it transforms it, and brings it to a new level. As at Cana, God’s grace and his gift come un-looked for and unexpected – who would ever have thought that all that wine would suddenly be made? And yet, although unexpected, God’s grace and his gift also come as the deepest fulfilment of the inner promise and potential of what was already naturally there as the voice of the Lord sounds upon the waters and the Kingdom of God is revealed before our eyes.

1. For a further exploration of these points, see Ratzinger, J., *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 248-254. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)