

900 Bottles of Wine: Sermon Preached at St John's, Devizes, Sunday 16th January 2022 (The Second Sunday after Epiphany)

Readings – 1 Corinthians 12: 1–11, John 2: 1–11

Everyone serves ... the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.

I think you all know me well enough by now to know that I enjoy the good things in life. So, clearly, did Jesus. In this morning's Gospel, Jesus turns water into wine on an industrial scale at a wedding. The water filled six huge jars, each holding "twenty or thirty gallons", which by my calculations would make more than 900 bottles of wine – which the guests found to be of superlative quality. This is a lot even for a seriously boozy wedding reception. It is so much wine that even the people at Friday evening lockdown parties at Number 10 Downing Street might not have managed to finish it all.

God wants you to enjoy life to the full. There are going to be enough tough moments in life as it is – the last two years, for example – so there is nothing wrong in making the most of the times when things are going well. Indeed, if you have been generally fortunate in life, do what you can to help others, but also be grateful, rather than being guilty for your blessings, for your gratitude can inspire a wonderful lightness of life but your guilt helps no-one.

As well as enjoying the good things in life, most of you will also know by now that I like to preach about how Jesus Christ was both truly God and truly human, and how God loves us in our humanity. Our Gospel reading this morning presents a very human scene, which takes place in a real human culture: a Jewish one. If I made a film about this scene, I would cast Maureen Lipman as Mary and Adam Sandler as Jesus. Jesus is clearly annoyed with his mother for trying to get him to intervene and keep the party going; Mary completely ignores Him and tells the staff to do whatever He says. Jesus, completely outfoxed by his mother, complies with her request.

So here we have Jesus, God made man, enjoying and helping others to enjoy the best of what it means to be human. What does this mean for us and for today's Church?

To help answer that, let me take you out of the Word of God for a moment into the world around us. I usually I detect the first, tentative and very early signs of Spring in the teen days of January, right at this time of the year. The evenings are now noticeably stretching. If one pays attention, the non-migratory birds are singing a little bit more enthusiastically, having been very drowsy in the depths of midwinter. I saw my first snowdrops of the year on Thursday.

Winter doesn't last forever. Not in the natural world and not in the life of the Church. And be in no doubt, we are living through a winter for the Church, in this country and around the whole continent of Europe. It is a different story in other parts of the world, of course. In Africa alone, for example, there were around 25 million Christians in 1950, but over half a billion today.

The Church in this country, however, was already in a weak state when the pandemic struck. These were the darkest days most of us have lived through, not least because churches were shut for first time in more than eight hundred years, with nowhere to pray together as we lived in fear and the news reported grim totals of dead every day. Now that was a bleak midwinter. But we survived as a parish. We tried to take care of one another and we tried to pray together as best as we could. It wasn't perfect, and we didn't even have a Rector for long parts of it, but we didn't roll over and give up. Did we perhaps learn a lesson there about not relying on anyone else to show us how to fix our problems – except for God? There are a lot of ordinary churches like ours dotted around the country, and a lot of ordinary clergy, who learned they had more resources within themselves than they realised.

There is just a chance that Church in England at the moment is living at a sort of middle of January time. At first glance, all is dead in the Church except in a few sheltered south-facing pockets. Look a little closer, through the lens of faith, and we may be coming towards the end of winter. The tiniest fragments of

new life are emerging. Springtime is still a long way off but the first signs of light are visible at the end of the tunnel.

The Church in this country had been at the centre of community life almost continually since the 4th Century. Over the last half-century, it increasingly felt like the wine had run out, like at the wedding in Cana. I ask you to pray for the Church to be filled with new wine. Many of you will quail at that, fearing that I want you to dance in the aisles barking like animals and go into the Market Place to ask people if they are “saved”. I suggest no such thing, for that is not my scene and I am quite sure it is not what St John’s is called to do for God.

As St Paul reminds us in this morning’s Epistle reading, we all have different gifts as individuals, just as all churches and congregations have distinct gifts. If God did not need churches like St John’s, He would not have brought us together to worship Him here. We did some work last year in groups on our own journeys to being worshippers at St John’s, on what we thought about our church, and what we wanted it to become. Continuing and developing that theme will be at least part of our Lent course this year.

No matter what age you are, no matter whether you have been a lifelong communicant or have only been exploring church for a few months, if you open yourself to God in prayer, he will show you how to be one of the signs of a new springtime in the Church at a time when it and the whole of our society need hope. Best of all, the plans he has for you will probably be lots of fun: our God, after all, is the one who, when nagged by his mother, turned some water into 900 bottles of *excellent* wine.

God made you to be the person you are and the roles he will call you fulfil will be ones that you are fitted for. And we need all kinds of people doing all sorts of roles, as St Paul reminded us in our Epistle reading this morning. So we need our St Pauls and our Sons of Thunder and our Marys and Marthas and Mary Magdalenes. We also need our Bartholomews and Matthiases of whom we know very little. We need *you* to serve God a little bit more attentively, as the person you are.

Trust that God is yet to serve the best wine for our Church. Trust that God wants you to enjoy life, as He did when He walked this earth in the person of Jesus Christ, and in that trust ask Him how you can be filled with His good wine and serve Him most faithfully, knowing that He wants to call you into a life rooted in joy, satisfaction, and peace.

Now to the Father whom the angels sing praises to, to the Son whom the Three Kings paid homage to, to Spirit who leads us to proclaim the Gospel to all nations, be glory in the highest until the end of all ages. Amen.