

Epiphany 4 – Year A, 2023

I would like to thank you all for coming today. Today is a really special day in the life of our church community, for two reasons. First, Archdeacon David will shortly be licensing Maggie as a Reader in the benefice and she will become the latest edition to our growing ministry team. Second, we are reminded that God is not just interested in the serious or difficult stuff in our lives, he is also a part of the joyful and the fun as well. And sometimes we need reminding of that. To steal the biblically based motto of our local school: Jesus comes to give us life in all its fullness.¹

Today we continue our journey through Epiphany; the Church's season of journeying, and as we do so we discover more about Jesus, God with us.

In recent weeks, we have followed the wisemen to the crib and joined them in adoration before the baby Jesus. We then blessed our houses to mark them, just like the Holy House of Nazareth, as the lodgings of God's holy people and a welcoming place to all who visit. We have reminded ourselves how, at our baptisms, we were set apart to be holy. Being sprinkled with the waters of baptism and new life, we recalled our baptismal faith and renewed our baptismal commitment to be Jesus' followers in the world.

Today, we discover a little more about this remarkable person Jesus. What today's passage from John's Gospel tells us, is that Jesus loved

¹ John 10:10

a party. It isn't just at Cana where we see him delighting in relaxed company and enjoying a bit of a knees up. Often, when he wasn't teaching, you'd find him at a party. We see him eating with tax collectors and sinners², in Pharisee's homes³, eating and drinking with Mary, Martha and Lazarus.⁴ The guests might include the powerful elite or the local riffraff. This annoyed the stuffy "religious" types who consequently accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard.⁵

When I was being trained for the priesthood, a visiting bishop told us of how he would visit his clergy and try and support them. He would ask them two questions: how often they prayed or spent time in worship with their congregations, and how often they partied with them? If one was greater than the other, he would suggest they had the balance wrong. He was convinced that faith was all about prayer and parties and getting the balance right was essential if the community was to stay healthy. Today's Gospel reading backs that up!

You'll be pleased to know that there is a small party after today's service to celebrate Maggie's licensing. But we only have conventional wine on offer.

So, today we journey with Christ to the wedding at Cana and hear of him performing his first miracle; turning water into wine. But this story is not about plying an already drunken gathering with more booze.

² Matthew 9:10-11; Mark 2:15-17; Luke 5:29-31;

³ Luke 14

⁴ John 12:2

⁵ Matthew 1:19

Rather, Jesus knew that once the wine ran out the party would come to a grinding halt. His generous provision enabled the party to go on.

This story is about God being concerned in ordinary, everyday life and that includes the wonderful, playful and joyful aspects of it.

Now, one gallon of wine produces 26 bottles. Therefore, Jesus makes between 520 and 780 bottles of wine. This is after the guests have already had plenty. Why? They surely didn't need that much to keep the party going. Well, it's because God's generosity is plentiful, not sparse. This event serves as another reminder that God provides in abundance, more than our hearts desire. Albeit not necessarily in the way we may expect.

We are enfolded in something of that abundance every week as we gather around the Holy Table of the Eucharist – the central unifying act of the Church worldwide and eternal.

How do we respond to this abundance? This apparently limitless generosity?

Imagine, would you for a second, how things would flourish if this was our overriding philosophy too. To put it simply our lives, our churches, our communities, our nation and our world would be transformed.

Yet, it can be so easy to recognise God's abundance and still do nothing in response. To allow the daily toil and grind to overshadow all the good intentions. To fall back into the habit of seeing the glass beginning to empty instead of overflowing. Pessimism is perhaps the greatest enemy of faith.

Or worse still, to allow the pressures of the world to distort our vision, even to the extent where we cease to see God's abundance in our lives at all. Sometimes, we just have to unlearn some of the drivel the corporate world and its power games thrusts down our busy necks. I think this is what St Paul is getting at when he says, 'God has made foolish the wisdom of the world'.⁶ As Paul reminds us, some will demand signs and others will demand evidence of other kinds, but for us we are called to share Christ. It will be a stumbling block to many, but to us it is 'the power of God and the wisdom of God'.

So, I ask you again, how are you responding to God's generous abundance?

Well, I am delighted that Maggie has chosen to respond in her own personal way by offering herself in ministry to this benefice. She will be a great addition to all that God is already doing here. Each of us has a calling. A calling to turn up. A calling to contribute; to burden some of the load; to inspire others and to willingly step into all that God is doing. A calling to be a part of Christ's body in the world; his hands, feet, ears and eyes in the here and now⁷ - as St Teresa of Avila might put it.

Elsewhere in the letter to the Corinthians, Paul says that 'God gives the growth' but that it is us who sow the seed and water it.⁸ Not to want to contradict the eminent St Paul, but I would also like to remind us that we find God nestling in the depths of our hearts, just as we see him in the faces of each other. So, it is God within us and amongst us that

⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:20

⁷ Teresa of Avila, attributed.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 3:7

prompts us to greater things. If we find our calling a burden, or the notion of growth challenging, perplexing or scary; if we find it difficult to offer ourselves in God's service, then maybe we just need to look where God is, recognise his overflowing generous abundance and take it from there.

Fr Rob