**John 2.1-11***19th January 2025*

## An Epiphany of Generous Love

*Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray to our hearts and minds. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

Weddings have their moments, as do wedding receptions. Many years ago now we attended one when, horror of horrors, the pudding ran out. We experienced this because, alas, we were the last table to go up for it. Now my suspicion is that the hotel was deploying some new, younger members of staff who were not experienced in the art of limiting the number of profiteroles you put on early takers at the buffet table. Because of their over eager generosity to the folk on tables who went up before us, by our turn they were eeking them out and I suppose we should have been grateful that at least we all got one each. The redeeming factor was that the cream was still in plentiful supply, so I came away with an ocean of it surrounding a single profiterole shaped island in the middle. Alas, no miracle took place!

Not so at Cana in Galilee. Jesus turns the water into wine and it’s a mind blowingly extravagant and generous gesture.

Commentators estimate that as Middle Eastern weddings often lasted up to a week, we are talking here of 500 litres from these 6 earthen ware jars. Now I did a calculation, at first multiplying by £5, thinking of the cheap bottles we often buy from Tescos. Even that came to £2,500. But then I realised I was doing exactly the opposite to what happens in the story. Jesus turns it into the best wine, not the cheapest. Obviously, it came from Waitrose, so we are probably talking double at £5,000!

Extravagant generosity is the characteristic of this, the first miracle recorded in John’s gospel. It isn’t, interestingly enough, one about feeding the hungry or curing the infirm but saving the day at a community event which celebrated love.

And in John’s view these were never ever to be considered merely as miracles. He had no time for faith built on the spectacular and sometimes has Jesus say just that. No, for him they are always signs, and this was the first of seven signs he records in his gospel. Moments to look beyond what happened to the meanings behind the happening, and there are lots of meanings here.

No first century church community would read this story without making a connection to the Eucharist and the wine shared in that special moment of remembrance and thanksgiving.

No student of scripture would read this story without making a connection to the idea that God’s presence among us is likened to a wedding feast, or our time in eternity to a heavenly banquet.

No seeker for better days would read this story without making a connection to the idea preached by Joel the prophet that God’s salvation would be like a time when *the mountains will drip with sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with it.*

Well, we are still in the season of Epiphany. A time when we recall the ways that God reveals himself to us. The baby at Bethlehem, the visit of the Wise Men, the Baptism of Jesus and the voice from heaven. All acts of self-disclosure by God. This is who I am.

Sometimes we understandably think that such communication best comes, or inevitably comes, through words. We value words and work had at them in our worship. But God isn’t limited to words.

So, in today’s story this is an epiphany of generous love made known through actions. Utilitarian water jars become vats of the best possible wine. So, what is the action saying to us today?

Of course, this morning’s story isn’t just about the wine, it’s also about the village.

It’s often said that in ancient societies it took a village to raise a child and that was surely true in Jesus’ day. Even in his own life there was that moment returning from the temple that his parents thought someone else from their village group was looking after him. A corporate sense of responsibility.

I would imagine that at this wedding at Cana everyone knew everyone else. The village would have loved this new couple. Two of their own had found love and their happiness is a cause for celebration by everyone. To run out of wine would spoil something so precious, the joy that a whole village was experiencing in the name of love. Could anything be more important in a community than such a celebration? It encapsulates so much of what makes life good: togetherness, companionship, putting each other first and community.

Jesus, says John, does everything he can to affirm these values. And that’s the sign; that God affirms them too.

It may seem odd to us but the evidence of God’s presence at Cana, the token of his blessing that day, was that the party could go on and the celebration of love was not curtailed.

Mary, I think had already had her own epiphany.

In John’s gospel she is never called by name but known instead as Jesus’ mother, and she doesn’t appear often. With the birth narrative missing she, in fact, is mentioned just twice. Here, at the beginning of her son’s ministry with his first sign, and then at the foot of the cross. The mother who is not only faithful but full of insight.

At one stage she urges Jesus to intervene. Like mothers through the ages, she prompts her son and encourages him to act. It’s amazing what a mother’s word can do! Even when he seems reluctant, she tells the steward to ‘do whatever he tells you’. These are words of confidence in Jesus because I suspect Mary had begun to not only appreciate, but also to understand him.

In those tantalising moments that aren’t recorded, the missing chapters of the gospel that we maybe wish had been written, might there not have been one, or many encounters, conversations and shared experiences when Mary got to know her son. Started to see his bright light and appreciate his deep knowledge. Began to realise that Gabriel’s message was being fulfilled before her. God was at work in her family, and maybe her heart still leapt at that realisation. So, she says words that are briming with confidence, love and belief in her son: *Do whatever he tells you.*Epiphany moments are those times, often fleeting times, when God’s presence seems real to us. They come not only as the bible is read, a sermon is heard, or prayers are recited, they can also come alive when a family gathers to celebrate a birthday, or a church has a meal to simply rejoice in being a community.

God’s love still shines into our world as brightly as any star above Bethlehem. As you stand beside a friend in need, as you give more time than was really necessary to be a shoulder to cry upon, as you went the extra mile to live out the values upon which your life is built – these too can be down to earth occasions when God blesses our world. Moments when water is turned into wine.

Now, I want to bring this talk to a close by appreciating that the lectionary sets it before us today at a united service of Holy Communion.

Fifteen months ago here at AFC our son got married. It was a huge privilege for me to preside at the wedding and then Rachel and I joined in as proud parents at the subsequent reception in the Old Town at The Kings Alms. As many of you know, the hotel has taken over the old Dissenting Meeting House behind them and turned it into a banqueting suite. So, I had a wry smile sitting at the family table with bride and groom placed under the large pulpit the hotel has surprisingly retained. Poor Matthew, I thought, son of the Manse and now having his wedding reception under a pulpit!

Yet something else struck me too as I took sat under the pulpit that afternoon and it was the atmosphere. As the bridegroom gave his speech there was so much love and laughter in the room. It felt, again and again, as if waves of encouragement and goodwill came upon that family table from the assembled guests behind us. It was a precious moment.

You see the truth is I barely knew half the people sitting behind me – they came from near and far and from parts of Matthew and Zoe’s life. We were strangers with one thing in common, our love for the bride and groom. We sat as guests not at tables belonging to us, but through an invitation willing issued to us by bride and groom. And in that evening we became friends together gathered around the happy couple.

Well here we are this morning, and I believe this gathering of two churches, from slightly different traditions yet in dedicated fellowship with each other is a precious epiphany moment for us. It reveals God’s love among us as we come, as it were to a wedding as guests invited to gather around a table which isn’t ours but Christ’s. And the joy and friendship revelled in as we take bread and wine together is made possible because Jesus is, as it were, the bridegroom around whom we gather, the one who makes strangers into friends.

So, for friendships shared, worship offered, prayers said, and commitments made, thanks be to God who joins our two churches together. With the Lord Jesus at the centre we come at this service, as at every service, as guests invited.

May it be so in the name of God, our creator, redeemer and sustainer, who revels at all moments whenever loved is shared and celebrated. The God who never wants the wine of joy to run out but rather does everything to make our run over. Amen.

 *Ian Green, Amersham, 12th January 2025*