

Fr Tim's Sermon – Sunday 21st January 2024

Third Sunday of Epiphany

Readings:

Revelation 19: 6-10

John 2: 1-11

And so, the year begins to roll on. It's now the third Sunday of Epiphany, and next week we'll celebrate the great feast of Candlemas, and then Christmas really will be over, and we will look to Lent, to Passiontide, and to Easter. As the words we'll hear next week will say, we will turn from the crib to the cross.

That turning is a moment in time, the feast of Candlemas, yes, but a movement from looking back to looking forward. Of course, our lives are full of such moments. Bringing up children is a good example, and we spend all our time either wishing they were older and more independent, or wishing they were still younger, so often forgetting to enjoy them as they are today. Not wishing they were still something they're not any more, and not wishing they were something they haven't yet become, but just enjoying who they are, in the present, today.

Yesterday morning, I was with members of this congregation at St Catherine's in Wakefield, and we were thinking about our faith, about our journey, about how God walks with us, and empowers us in our lives. We recognised that it's not difficult to see where God has helped us in the past, and we recognised that we all have hopes and dreams for the future which we can bring before God, but we also recognised that perhaps the hardest place to see God is in the present.

We know that God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, and we will say this as we light a new Paschal Candle in just over two months' time, but perhaps we have to stop and remember that if God is God of all times, then he is God of the present as much as he is of the past or the future.

This is the season of Epiphany. The season of revelation. The season when we recognise that Jesus was brought into the lives of all people. Let's just remember the significant moments of the Epiphany. There's the coming of the Magi when Jesus was revealed as King, as Lord and as Sacrifice by the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. There's the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan, when Jesus was revealed by the voice from Heaven proclaiming him as the son of God, in whom God is well pleased. And there's the wedding at Cana, when Jesus performed his first miracle and revealed himself to all who were present, who in turn as we heard this morning, believed in him.

Weddings in Jesus' day were enormous affairs. The celebrations went on for days, and everybody had their part to play. Just imagine that you are part of this story. The wedding feast is going so well. The bride and groom look radiant. The mothers' in law are getting on like a house on fire. And then, disaster strikes, and they have run out of wine.

One of the roles of the bridegroom was to provide the wine. And now, in an instant, the bridegroom is about to be humiliated in front of his friends and his family, and worse still, the friends and family of his bride.

You can almost picture the scene. The bridegroom's best friends are gathering around him. How much money do you have? Let's pop out to the off licence and see how much wine we can buy in bulk? What can we do to restore the honour and dignity of this bridegroom who is about to fall from grace.

Of course we don't know, but we can only assume that it is the bridegroom's own fault this has gone wrong. Yes, perhaps he didn't know how popular he was and how many people would come, but at the same time, weddings were community celebrations, and so he should have realised that a lot of wine would be needed.

But whether it was his own fault or not, whether the blame should be at his feet or not, he needed a way out. And in the midst of everything else that could, or may, have been happening, there is one person present who knows that there is a solution.

Mary, the mother of Jesus. She who has borne him in her womb, given birth in a stable, listened to the prophet Simeon describe him as the light of the gentiles and the glory of Israel, she who saw first hand the gifts of the magi, she who knows that one day she, and he, will suffer more than anyone should ever have to suffer.

Mary knows what's happening. We don't know what relation she is to the bridegroom, but we can see that she cares. Whether she is close family, or whether she is a hanger on in a community celebration of the marriage of a couple from many streets away, we will never know. But she shows a love, she shows a care, she shows a realisation that this could happen to anybody and that this bridegroom is in trouble.

And in this moment, she comes to Jesus. This is a moment with a difference. It isn't the gifts of the magi foretelling something in the dim and distant future. It isn't a voice from heaven announcing how pleased God is with everything Jesus has achieved in the past. This is here. This is now. This is Jesus' presence in the moment. And Mary simply tells him it as it is – They have no wine!

Well perhaps Jesus is more of a beer drinker. Perhaps he's had his fill of gin and tonics, and doesn't fancy the wine. Perhaps I'm being a little too flippant, but for whatever reason, Jesus' response is to give his mother a telling off. What concern is that to you and me. My hour has not yet come. The Messiah is a thing of the future, and humanity must wait until he is ready to be revealed.

But Mary had other ideas. There's no more backwards and forwards. There's no big argument and loss of dignity. There's a simple command from Mary to the servants – "Do whatever he tells you".

Is Jesus now over a barrel, if you'll excuse the pun? He's been put out there, in the sight of everyone. The servants are waiting for instructions, they're waiting with great expectation. Who is this man? Does he own a vineyard? Does he have a huge supply of wine waiting to be collected and brought to the feast? What's he going to do?

Perhaps one of the reasons why it's so difficult to see God's work in the world of today, in the moment here and now, is that this work of God is not always what we hope or expect it to be. And perhaps we see this most clearly in Jesus' behaviour in this story.

Surely the last thing the servants are expecting is to be told to fill enormous water jars with water. How's that going to help? The servant who took the water from the jar and gave it to the steward must have had some courage. He knew this was water. He knew all that had happened. He must have been petrified. He was the one who was about to bear all the anger of the situation. And then, the steward drank. Then, the miracle was seen. Then, the servant must have gone back and had a good look in the water jar. Did he understand? Probably not. Was he astonished? Almost certainly. Had he shown a long and faithful service to God, and recognised God in the past? We'll never know. Had he placed that day in God's hands when he woke that morning? Maybe he had, and maybe he hadn't.

But had this man lived in the present and put his trust in Jesus? Yes, he had. And he was one of those who saw, when as we heard from St John, Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

Jesus is revealed. That is what this season of Epiphany is all about. But what will we do because of it. His disciples believed in him. We believe in him, and will state that belief in a couple of minutes' time in the Creed. The disciples were changed by him. In this season of Epiphany, are we ready to see. In this season of Epiphany, are we ready to come to him? In this season of Epiphany, are we ready to be changed? As we turn from the crib to the cross at Candlemas in a week's time, what are we asking of Jesus as we travel through Lent? What will it mean to us to stand at the foot of the cross, with that same Mary, mother of our Lord, as she says to us – today is the day. They have no wine! What does that mean today, and how will you respond when your call comes?

Jesus is lord of the present. We know him in the past. We put our hope in him for the future. But do we give him all that he calls of us, now, here, today? He is ready to be with us, as he was at the wedding feast in Cana, but are we ready, really ready, truly ready, to do whatever he asks of us?