

# My Big Fat Gospel Wedding

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Epiphany, Year C, 16 January 2022  
St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia  
**The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell**

Isaiah 62: 1-5; Psalm 36: 5-10; 1 Corinthians 12: 1-11; John 2: 1-11

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Let me tell you about my big fat middle Eastern wedding. It was nearly twenty years ago, and I was new at St Paul's, Manuka, when a young couple came to ask about getting married. They were in a bit of a state, and I soon found out why. She was a Greek, and he was a Turk. Her Greek Orthodox parish wouldn't touch them, and while he was non-practicing, he was still a Muslim, and no-one wanted to risk it with the Imam. So, as luck would have it, they came to the Anglican priest. My clergy colleagues will recognise this as one of those pastoral situations where you know immediately what you have to do, and you do it.

So, we had a Greek wedding at St Paul's, followed by a very middle Eastern reception, which I'll get to. I borrowed the DVD of a family wedding from Lisa's Greek hairdresser, and I played it in the locked church on my laptop, so I could learn and practice the moves, like a

proper Greek priest—such as the crowning ceremony, and the threefold walk, where the priest leads the couple around the altar three times by hand, while singing a hymn to the Trinity, solo and unaccompanied. I didn't know any Greek hymns, so I treated them to that Anglican Trinity Sunday favourite, 'Holy, Holy, Holy'. Well, we got through it. The best bit for me was all the old Greek ladies kissing my hand as they left the church—an opportunity I subsequently offered to my own congregation, though with surprisingly few takers.

Anyway, then came the reception, and here's the point of my story. It reminds me of the wedding at Cana: the same sort of big fat community celebration, the same excess of good spirits, the same infectious togetherness, with no sign of today's prudent COVID restrictions, and an unconscionable quantity of wine on offer. The reception started with the parents and grandparents piped in by those horns with the flared mouths that you see snake charmers using, but they sounded more like car horns. And finally, the couple came in, to delirious cheers.

There was great middle Eastern food from the Turkish side—not a rubber chicken in sight—plus there was ouzo and wine from the Greek side. Then came the dancing. And I don't mean old couples shuffling about, or half-tanked tradies shifting from foot to foot in the vicinity of

their girlfriends. It was Zorba the Greek circle dancing by men, big men, with jackets and ties off, shirts open to the navel, lathered in sweat, everyone laughing, with arms around each-others' shoulders, skipping clockwise, then anti-clockwise, with all the onlookers clapping in time, and there was me in the midst of it—an absolute natural, or so I like to think. A few of the older ladies were saying things like “look at Father having a good time”.

Friends, this is what you need to have in mind when you hear today's Epiphany story, today's revelation story, of Jesus at that notorious Cana wedding. The joy of the gospel is what this wedding imagery is meant to evoke, picking up the theme of Isaiah today, of restoration and celebration: let the good times roll; also, the Psalmist's imagery of happy times—of God's guests filled with good things, and with drink from the river of his delights.

It's imagery of sharing a blessed life together, which is what we see also in our 1 Corinthians reading, with its picture of a community blessed with gifts and brought together to celebrate and to share these gifts. But we need to take care about this passage. We typically hear this 1 Corinthians text about spiritual gifts in individualistic terms, because we belong to an individualistic culture and we can't help interpreting the

bible's message in individualistic terms. We think in terms of our own gifts and talents, our skill set, as if the spiritual life is about compiling a killer CV or acing a job interview. And the Church has well and truly bought into this joyless corporate model. I've actually been asked in Church job interviews, 'what are your gifts for ministry'? I typically say, 'a great complexion'.<sup>1</sup>

But Paul's teaching today about gifts in the Church is that they're collective not individual, that they're collaborative not autonomous. These gifts are for the whole community to shape its life and mission. So, the gifted Christian life of 1 Corinthians 12 is more like what talent means for an orchestra or a sports team, which is about more than a line-up of individual talents. Gifted individuals are a good thing, but the real point is the gifted group, the gifted undertaking. This is a Catholic vision of the Church: not a social contract entered into by individual spiritually gifted Protestant Christians, but a divinely gifted organic body that gives birth to and nurtures its individual members.

So, friends, we can too easily miss the point—and, more than that, we can miss the fun. I remember too many Anglican weddings where the

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<sup>1</sup> Fr Cowdell currently—and, thankfully, temporarily—has a strikingly red and blotchy face thanks to a standard course of ointment for heading off skin cancers (something fair skinned people who grew up in hot climates should prudently undergo every few years from middle age). One looks better afterwards!

congregation was distracted and many looked bored, and the reception was boring, too. And not just because the priest tends to get put on what I used to call the best behaviour table, with all the extremely elderly relatives, all of them intent on saying nothing the whole time, for two hours' hard labour with me on my best behaviour, unable to get a laugh let alone say anything outrageous—*for two whole hours*. This is why my big fat middle Eastern wedding was such a revelation, and a lifelong memory that I treasure. Because at that particular celebration of the marriage sacrament, I got a sense of the bigger picture, just as we do with Jesus and the wedding at Cana. It was about revelling in God's overflowing goodwill, which Jesus loved to celebrate in human company, and in the Easter promise that such celebrations will never end.

The Lord be with you ...