

Sharing Christ's Glory

Sermon for the 2nd Sunday of Epiphany, Year C, 20 January 2019

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT, Australia

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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.

“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.” (John 2: 11)

Friends, today's gospel is another Epiphany story. In this tale of the best lubricated wedding ever, Jesus and his new creation is revealed and his disciples wake up to what's going on, to what's at stake. But first let me tell you what's not going on, and what's not at stake.

Modern people in the Western world often think that God is a big invisible being who wields sovereign power over the world, a God who bends nature and history to his will and, consequently, a God increasingly hard to believe in. And if God's like that, then all we can say about Jesus is that he's a miracle worker if you believe in miracles, or a moral teacher sent by God if you don't believe in

miracles. But if that's how we think about God, whether or not we believe, it's hard to make sense of Jesus as God with us, or of ourselves being caught up together in God's life through the Holy Spirit of God. Likewise, if God is the great big cosmic force whose glory means power and control, the ultimate isolated 'I am', then the Trinity looks like irrelevant speculation—indeed, anything to do with relationships looks secondary and unimportant.

Atheists reject this great big male-in-the-sky view of God, and I believe they're right to do so. Likewise many believers are uneasy about what to do with Gospel passages like today's one, where it seems that impossible things are being made to happen by God. We can get bogged down with these questions of literal truth in the Bible and twist ourselves out of shape to accommodate them. Let me give a couple of examples.

There were liberal Protestant New Testament scholars in the nineteenth-century who said that Jesus walking on the water in the Gospel stories was really Jesus walking on a just-submerged sandbank. Or Jesus feeding the multitude was really about inspiring hungry people to get out their jealously guarded food and start sharing it. In other words, they took the passages to be about literally true historical events accurately reported but they replaced the troublesome supernatural explanation with a more credible

naturalistic one, to try to fit their faith together with their reason. The problem arises when both atheists and believers think that God is about supernatural whizz-bangery, and that these passages are literal reporting rather than spiritual teachings full of allegory. And as for the supernatural explanation of the supposedly factual events that are accurately reported, the atheists rightly reject it while the believers wrongly insist on it.

I'm not saying I'm entirely with the atheists, however. Because John and the other Gospels don't give us disinterested reports of neutral fact. Instead, they craft stories of faith that arise from the lived experience of their Churches. No ancient person hearing today's Gospel would have been worried about whether a god could intervene in nature to turn water into wine. They didn't have the independent natural world ruled by scientific laws that modern people came to discover, which left God with no option but to intervene from the outside. Instead, God was the beyond in the midst, and especially so in Jesus Christ. This is a God at home in God's world, and a God whose activity is all about people and communities and transformed lives, not about great whizz-bang spectacles to show off God's glory before the crowd. I daresay that an ancient person hearing today's Gospel wouldn't ask "could God or could Jesus have done this miracle" but rather, "what does this sign mean?" "What sort of God do we meet in this story?" "And who is

this Jesus, whose disciples we're told have come to believe in him?" "What's this story about?" "What's going on, and what's at stake?" That's how an ancient person would have heard it, and that's how we need to hear it.

So, friends, the glory revealed by Jesus in today's Gospel isn't naked power over matter, or over history. Rather, we have a quirky Jewish-sounding story about a young man arguing with his Jewish mother about his proper priorities, and eventually she gets her way, saying to the steward "do whatever he tells you", which leaves Jesus no room to manoeuvre. This is a bit like a scene from Italian Opera, where the great man is bested by the smart woman. Clearly, Jesus' glory doesn't mean having to win, to get his own way, to come first. So neither do we Christians have to prove our point, to insist on our own way, or make rivals out of those we envy, let alone descending into controlling behaviour or violence. The great big sovereign God who lords it over nature and history is more like an abuser than a loving Father, and certainly this God is nothing like Jesus—whose glory, as Martin Luther said, was seen most clearly in the manger and on the cross.

Friends, the glory of God in today's Gospel passage is revealed in the strangest way, as Jesus creates an occasion of delight and celebration for his disciples and his mother and their friends. This is the point.

Not the van load of wine from Dan Murphy's Cellars that turned up out of the blue, and how it got there, but the shift away from water of purification to wine of celebration, the shift away from prudent accounting—serving cheap wine as soon as you could get away with it, when the guests were too drunk to notice—and serving good vintage to them instead, even when they probably couldn't appreciate it. And this is God's glory that we Christians discover in our fellowship together, in liking and getting to know each other as friends together and as God's friends. And we do this especially here in the Eucharist, where a new sign with wine, and with bread, feeds and blesses Christ's wedding guests Sunday by Sunday—even if we don't always appreciate it.

Our other readings this morning point in the same direction. Isaiah tirelessly proclaims the dignity of God's people at a time when all seems to be disgrace and forsakenness. God will bless and restore the fortunes and the reputation of God's people. And so Isaiah's invitation is to take heart—an invitation that eventually takes us to the wedding at Cana, and to our Eucharist here today. This morning's psalm testifies to God's core business, to God's business plan, which is to bless the children of Adam, which means all of humanity, while making special mention of God's own people, too—the ones who know God and are true of heart. Here is the Old Testament God, the

God of the covenant, the faithful God who never forgets Israel, and whose glory is forever bound up with the thriving of God's people.

And what of us, Christians today, as we take all this in? The message of Paul in our epistle reading today may seem strange to us in our age of individualism, in which choice is everything and we have to make our own way in a competitive world. But in today's epistle we see instead Paul's vision of the Church as a community called together by God, in which everyone brings the gifts they've been given, in which everyone matters, in which difference is welcomed as a blessing not a threat, and where whatever we have is only ours so that it can become a blessing to others. Here is a call to join Christ and his friends in Cana for a wedding to remember, where all are blessed, all are surprised, all share the joy of being together with Jesus, and the Blessed Virgin Mary his mother, and his disciples. And we're responding to this call as we gather here this morning.

The Lord be with you ...