

An Address by Nigel Guthrie for 24 January 2021, Epiphany 3: The Feast of God

In the past year many of us have missed celebrations. And I'm not talking about the wrapped chocolates in the red box! Many of us have missed the opportunity to celebrate significant milestones in our lives. Perhaps we have still been able to celebrate in a small way at home or even online? But most of those great celebratory gatherings for birthdays, weddings, graduations and anniversaries that we might have been anticipating, have been postponed or cancelled. I feel for those unfortunate people who had booked weddings with us for last year are now on their third possible date! And people of faith lost many of their annual festivals, as we did last Easter. It's natural to feel a sense of regret about what has been lost and to wonder when we will be able to meet together again.

We don't have to read far through the Gospels to notice that Jesus enjoyed a celebration and this account of the wedding at Cana in Galilee which comes so near the beginning of John's gospel, sets the tone. What Jesus does at this wedding, and the way John writes it up, tell us a lot about what God wants for us and what Jesus came to bring?

Firstly, we notice the sheer abundance that Jesus provides for the wedding feast. If we take the lower end of the estimated capacity of the stone water jars, Jesus turned a 120 gallons of water in to wine, which equates to around 540 litres of wine. Now even if it was a big wedding, that's a lot of wine! And that's really the point. The exact amount doesn't matter. What matters is that the provision which Jesus makes is abundant and generous. This first sign of Jesus in John's gospel speaks vividly of the abundant and generous provision which God makes for our lives.

And this isn't a one-off. The theme of God's abundant provision is one which we find elsewhere in the gospels. In the feeding of the 5,000 after everyone has had enough there are many baskets of food left over. And when Jesus teaches about giving in St Luke chapter 6 he says "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap."

Many people have been pausing to count their blessings during this pandemic. It's easy to complain about what has been lost, and about the restrictions which we are enduring. But it's really much better for our souls and spirits to spend time in thankful prayer to God for all that we have received, and too easily take for granted.

Secondly, the story of the Cana wedding feast speaks of renewal. As always in St John's accounts there is a symbolic message in the telling of any story and in this passage the stone water jars give us a clue. They were used in the Jewish rites of purification. By turning the water into wine Jesus showed that the rites and ceremonies of the old covenant would be replaced by a new covenant. The relationship between God and humanity would no longer depend on repeated sacrifices and ceremonies but on 'grace and truth'. The covenant which once rested on obedience to the law, would now be based on love.

Simple slogans and simple rules are always popular, and their popularity is exploited by politicians and others who want to gather a following. Jesus took a wholly different approach. His teaching shows us that loving others is complicated and often costly. As with the Woman taken in Adultery or the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan we are shown that the ones we need to love aren't always the most obvious. Sometimes they are those who have had real difficulties, those who have gone astray or those who are different from us. At least one aspect of the renewal we need is to see others through the eyes of Jesus in their humanity and brokenness and to find the image of God in them.

And thirdly and finally Jesus shows his followers that the best is yet to come. Perhaps, just at the moment, we can be tempted to think that the best is behind us? Perhaps our health is not as good as it was, or we have lost good friends or lost something our sense of purpose? Perhaps we are poorer than we were or feel diminished by the restrictions under which we are living? But Jesus assures the bridegroom that he has kept the good wine until now. John starts this account with the phrase 'on the third day' and perhaps that is there to remind us of the resurrection through which we are promised eternal life. The best is yet to come.

The promise of a future glorious banquet pervades scripture. The prophet Isaiah said 'On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine-- the best of meats and the finest of wines.' Jesus himself used the image of a wedding feast to portray the Kingdom of Heaven to which all people are invited. And in today's reading from Revelation we read 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'

The central act of Christian worship, Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Mass, is often described as a celebration. Its central prayer is one of thanksgiving. It sustains

us now but is also a foretaste of what God promises us; a glorious feast which includes all people, and which never ends. Many of us will be missing that Eucharistic celebration at the moment, along with other celebrations we had planned, but this account of the Cana wedding reassures us that God is still with us, that his provision is generous and bountiful. In spite of our present restrictions and losses, God continues to prepare good things for us here and in the world to come.