

Dorset South & West Circuit - Written Service for Sunday 16 January 2022 – 'The New Wine' - by Revd David Cuckson

Opening Sentences (*Psalm 39:5-9*)

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgements are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.

How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.

HYMN Singing the Faith 79 (*Isaac Watts*)

1. I'll praise my Maker while I've breath;
and when my voice is lost in death,
praise shall employ my nobler powers;
my days of praise shall ne'er be past,
while life and thought and being last,
or immortality endures.

2. Happy are they whose hopes rely
on Israel's God! He made the sky,
and earth and sea, with all their train;
his truth for ever stands secure;
he saves the oppressed, he feeds the poor,
and none shall find his promise vain.

3. The Lord pours eyesight on the blind;
the Lord supports the fainting mind;
he sends the labouring conscience peace;
he helps the stranger in distress,
the widow and the fatherless,
and grants the prisoner sweet release.

4. I'll praise him while he lends me breath;
and when my voice is lost in death,
praise shall employ my nobler powers;
my days of praise shall ne'er be past,
while life and thought and being last,
or immortality endures.

Prayer

We thank you, God, that you have always loved the world you have made. We thank you that in Jesus this love of yours was fully expressed. We thank you that he was known as the friend of those whom most people despised, and that he shared his plans and his work with ordinary men and women like ourselves. We thank you for the honour of being called his friends, and we pray that we may not let him down.

We know that this friendship has not always seemed real to us. We are sorry that we are so often worried, as if your love were not there. We are sorry, too, that we do too little to make your friendship real to other people. We pray that we may be forgiven, and that you will show us how we may be better friends and followers of Jesus. For his name's sake. **Amen.**

Heavenly Father, in whom is the fullness of grace and wisdom, we trust now in the forgiveness which you have promised in the life, death and resurrection of your Son, and we now ask that our minds may be enlightened by your Holy Spirit, and that we may be given grace to receive your Word with reverence and humility, without which no-one can understand your truth. For Christ's sake. **Amen.**

John 2:1-11 (NRSVA)

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.' Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Reflection

John refers to this story about Jesus as 'the first of his signs'. Over the Christmas season we have heard passages from the first chapter of John's Gospel, which forms the Prologue to the whole book and provides a setting for what is to follow. The climax of his work will come with the account of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. The intervening chapters, beginning with today's reading, tell of Jesus' ministry, but the individual stories and the way they have been put together are designed to construct a picture of Jesus and his work, so that we can better understand his true significance when we come to read the final chapters. So stories are selected as a number of 'signs' to highlight the message that John wants to convey about Jesus – they become symbols of an aspect of Jesus' character, but pointing all the time to his essential character. So in chapter 6 we hear how Jesus fed the multitude as 'the bread of life'. In chapters 8 and 9 among other things he heals a blind man as 'the light of the world'. Here in chapter 2 Jesus enhances the water of the Jewish tradition with the wine of the Gospel.

In these stories there is a contrast between the what is seen and what is also true but unseen, between the external event and the internal truth. So a sign in John's Gospel has been described as 'a visible pointer to the invisible truth about him who performs it'. In fact, the whole ministry of Jesus, all his actions, point forward to the supreme sign of his death on the Cross and his resurrection from the dead. Everything in his life is a sign, demonstrated in action, of the love of God.

There is a significant detail in the story of the wedding at Cana of Galilee and that relates to the stone water-jars. Any reader from the Jewish tradition, or familiar with it (someone like the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts, not a Jew but clearly familiar with the Old Testament scriptures), would immediately think of the Jewish rites of purification, formal washing with water, sometimes just the hands, at other times total immersion.. So here we have Jesus using these water-jars, initially filled with water, but now with the power and personality of Jesus becoming wine. The Jewish dispensation, represented by the water, is now through the word and work of the Lord superseded by and transformed into the wine of the Gospel. This alone can meet the needs of the occasion. This alone can meet man's most basic needs. This alone can bring salvation. As John has already made it clear in his Prologue at chapter

1 verse 17, 'The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.'

We should not ignore the roots of our faith in the Old Testament. It is not always easy to see how religious understanding developed over the centuries. Dating the various books and even elements within books can be difficult. There are stories there that include details that we would rather were not there, such as glorying in the misfortunes, even the death and destruction, of the enemies of the people of Israel. But there are highlights too, such as the prophetic calls to righteousness or the call to the people to be a 'light to the nations'. Nevertheless what we see in the person and teaching of Jesus is of a different order altogether, introducing us to the kingdom of heaven, a realm essentially of supreme love, where we can say with conviction that God is Love. This is fine wine indeed.

This is the principal point here, that the touch of Christ upon our life effects a change that can only be described as miraculous. The water has become wine. But there is also a secondary point, and that is: with Christ there is always more and better to come. When the steward tastes the water that has become wine, he calls the bridegroom in surprise to comment, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.' And that common situation is true of much of life, of our own relations with people we meet. When people first meet us, they normally see what is best about us. We are polite, we try to be friendly, we make an effort to be considerate. But we know that we do not always match up to this standard, and as people see more of us and get to know us better, they may also see the 'inferior' side of us from time to time. In relation to our communion with God, however, this is not the case. As we follow Christ, as through him we deepen our fellowship with God, at every stage we may say, 'You have kept the good wine until now.'

As those who can taste the good wine in Christ we can enjoy being part of a great fellowship of love that embraces us, encourages us, inspires us to find a deeper faith, one that continually enriches our understanding, deepens our commitment, and fills us with a love that can spill out into the whole of our life and our dealings with the lives of those with whom we come into contact. No longer like insipid water, pure though that may be, but rather like mature wine worthy of being served at the wedding banquet in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Saviour.

HYMN Singing the Faith 346 (*Fred Pratt Green*)

1. Christ is the world's light, Christ and none
other;
born in our darkness, he became our brother.
If we have seen him, we have seen the Father:
glory to God on high.

3. Christ is the world's Life, Christ and none
other;
sold once for silver, murdered here, our brother -
he, who redeems us, reigns with God the Father;
glory to God on high.

2. Christ is the world's Peace, Christ and none other;
no one can serve him and despise another;
Who else united us, one in God the Father?
Glory to God on high.

4. Give God the glory, God and none other;
give God the glory, Spirit, Son, and Father;
give God the glory, God with us, my brother;
glory to God on high.

Prayers

Lord God, the story of your love for us makes us realize that there are many others as well as ourselves who need your help and your grace.

So we bring out prayers to you:

for those who suffer pain;

for those whose minds are disturbed, or have never matured;

for those who have not had the opportunity to realize their potentialities;

for those who are satisfied with something less than the life for which they were made;

for those who know their guilt, their shallowness, their need, but who do not know of Jesus;

for those who know that they must shortly die;

for those who cannot wait to die.

Lord God, your Son has taken all our sufferings upon himself and has transformed them.

Help us, who offer these prayers, to take the sufferings of others upon ourselves, and so, by your grace, become the agents of your transforming love.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen.

The Blessing

May God, the giver of hope, fill us with all joy and peace because we trust in him, so that we may have abundant hope through the power of the Holy Spirit and may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and fellowship in the Holy Spirit, be with us all.

Amen.

[Prayers taken and adapted from Contemporary Prayers for Public Worship published by SCM]