

Quantity, quality, quaffability

Bishop Michael's sermon for 24 January 2020

Third Sunday of Epiphany, 21.01.24

Are you keeping Dry January this month? I am not, but I know many who are. It is an important public health opportunity, giving up alcohol for a while after the indulgence of Christmas. This year it can be particularly helpful for us to attend to our drinking in these days of lockdown. But if you are trying to keep dry January, this morning's gospel reading might be quite a challenge, because it shows Jesus doing something very different.

At the wedding in Cana of Galilee, he produces a huge amount of wine out of water. Let's do the mathematics. Six stone jars, each holding between 20 or 30 gallons, are filled to the brim with water. Even if each jar only holds 20 gallons, this means 120 gallons, 545 litres, of wine. A standard bottle of wine today is 75 cl: so Jesus has produced the equivalent of 727 bottles for a party which has already drunk its way through the cellar. On the higher figure of 30 gallons, the stock-taking rises to 1090 bottles, I think. If you had been enjoying yourself at that wedding in Cana of Galilee, you probably would have had a very sore head next morning.

That is a lot of wine. What is the gospel trying to tell us? It is not really about drinking alcohol or abstaining from alcohol. It is, as John says, a sign: a sign of abundance, of super-abundance.

Our God is a God of excessive generosity, exuberant in the kindness he lavishes upon us. This is his nature – how he is, who he is. This theme of abundance runs through the New Testament. The Sower scatters the grain everywhere; most is lost, but what falls on good soil produces amazing yields: 30, 60, 100-fold. In another parable, workers recruited to the vineyard at the last hour are paid with the same generosity as others who have slaved through the day, to the bewilderment of all. Paul says that the love of God is shed abroad by the Holy Spirit into the hearts of the ungodly, and in their justification the justice of God bears the fruits of amazing grace. Christian faith speaks of undeserved, unexpected, unscientific abundance; this is the sign which Jesus sets before us at Cana of Galilee.

So this wedding at Cana is a story of great quantity; but it is also a story of high quality – the wine Jesus provides is of the very best. There is a man called the steward of the feast; today, we would call him the event organiser. He is the person who is meant to be in charge, making sure that all the plans go right. He is surprised that the Lord has kept the best wine till last. One early writer says that this steward is the only person whose judgement about the wine we can trust. Why is that? Well, because he has to organise the party, he is the only person there who has had to stay sober.

This best wine is kept to the end: what Jesus gives is promised as the completion of our time, the perfection of our human nature, a fullness of life for which all our days here on earth are a training and a preparation. John says that at Cana Jesus 'revealed his glory': that is the word he uses for the fulfilment of what we are meant to be. The glorious quality of the life Jesus offers to you and to me cannot be beaten for quality.

So we have quantity and we have quality; but any sermon needs three points, and it would be good if the third also began with a 'q'. So, with apologies, I give you the word 'quaffability': by which I mean, the urge to drink more and more of this wine. For an alcoholic, of course that is a problem; but the water become wine that Jesus gives is such that we want to return to it again and again, because it changes us from glory to glory drawing us closer to the God whose nature is love.

The quaffability of this wine changes people's lives as they grow in their relationship with God. The tradition of the Orthodox Church says that the groom at the wedding in Cana was actually Simon the Zealot, and it was because of Cana that he became one of the twelve apostles chosen by Jesus – he had been so affected by what he experienced there. There are traditions which says that Simon preached the gospel in Africa and Asia, and some say in Britain; and that he met a martyr's death in Persia, or some say near Grimsby.

That may or may not be the case, but we do not have to be one of the twelve apostles to want to drink again and again the wine of the Kingdom which the Lord gives us, and to have our lives changed as we do that. At the moment, of course, in most of our churches we are not gathering physically for the eucharist, and when we can do so it will be a long time before we can again share in the common cup of wine. But that experience, and the opportunity of 'spiritual communion' which we can make online, can make us think more deeply about this great sacramental gift, which we can usually enjoy and which we often take for granted.

The early Christians saw in the miracle at Cana a pointer to the wonder of Holy Communion. One of them, St Cyril of Jerusalem, wrote this: 'Once at Cana in Galilee he changed water into wine by his own will; is it incredible that he should change wine into blood?' This quaffable wine of Cana draws us closer and closer to our generous God. Its quality speaks to us of the unimaginable glory to which we are called. Its sheer quantity proclaims the vastness of God's love poured out for us. And what was miraculously provided as a one-off for invited guests in one town in Galilee is now given to us all, in God's grace freely lavished upon us. Even in these times of restriction and anxiety, particularly in these times of restriction and anxiety, God in Christ renews the wonder of Cana: he gives us the abundant wine of hope, to drink again and again.

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