

Let us pray.

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of each of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight o lord, our God, our rock, and our redeemer. Amen.

“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”.

I am grateful for this opportunity to reflect with you this morning, and to enjoy the possibilities of the scriptures in your company. I do think there's a note of irony that a Methodist is invited to preach on a reading of mass wine production, but I am happy to embrace it!

I also wish I was kidding, but I sadly don't think I am, when I say that there have been times in the life of Methodists where reflection on this reading would have focused more on how it probably wasn't real alcohol than what the Gospel was wanting to share with us within it. I assure you that will not be the case today.

I want to share with you some words sung by a band called the Handsome Family; they're a sort of macabre alt-country outfit. I'm not sure this is ever going to be in the repertoire of the choir here, but I share it nonetheless because of its humour.

I heard tell of the miracles my blessed saviour done
He took a great big ball of fire and forged the blazing sun
But out of all of those miracles divine
By far my favourite one was turning water into wine

Water into wine, my lord done something fine
He saved my soul and gave me peace of mind
Now there's no cause for worry, everything is fine
Ever since he came and changed my water into wine

They had a big ol' party, Lord, they killed the fatted calf
But when it came to alcohol, they only bought enough for half
But Jesus waved his arms and said, "Go check them urns again
I think you'll find they're all full of wine up to the brim"

If you're headed down boy and you can't afford a drink
I hope this little parable's gonna stop and make you think
Fear not, brother, take His hand and He'll bring you peace of mind
He'll crash your evil party and change your water into wine

The Handsome Family - Water Into Wine

I wonder if, like the reading, the song that emerges from it, causes us to lift a little; to laugh and maybe even to smile, because it's actually a deeply hopeful one; not only in ordinary times, but particularly in the face of the last 10 months, that we have shared together.

While a wedding of this size, and committed consumption, would be irresponsible and illegal under present lockdown, or even probably in the near future, this great feast is the one that I think speaks to our times, in a refreshing and rich way and maybe, just because of the anticipated excess within it.

When we entered lockdown 10 months ago, it opened the door to uncertainty. We've celebrated being the church for 2000 years and that has gone on and off relatively well. We have enjoyed wine at the table through those centuries, and we've done that in the midst of war, of plague, of extreme poverty, of Spanish flu, and so much else; the party has been going well, though it's been getting wearying in some parts of late.

But then we entered the first lockdown of 2020, and questions began to emerge.

For us the pandemic created an unprecedented time, but not for the church of 2000 years and across continents. It was not something unique. We remember that Jesus himself lived in an age where people needed to self-isolate because of leprosy; where there have been global and national pandemics before; where there's been war; where there's been threat and danger. The difference this time was that it was something that we were living through.

And 10 months on there is a sense, in some places, that the wine is running out, if it hadn't already, and that somehow a crisis is looming. Yet the reading we share today, can inspire a renewed theological imagination for our times. You see, what if we were to risk imagining, that the best wine is about to be shared.

When ten months ago priests and bishops and archbishops and popes, ministers and pastors, wardens, deacons, elders, and stewards, suddenly were faced with the need to suspend worship in person, physically together, it felt for a moment like the wine had run out. The vessels that had served us so well, these buildings which enabled our gathering, and our mission, and our service of our communities, were locked, and signs were put up to explain why we were not there.

And in that moment the metaphorical mother at the wedding directed the wine stewards to go and talk to her son, and Jesus' response? "Go and get a laptop and take it over there to the chief steward. Log into Zoom or Teams or Facebook or YouTube, and let him comment on what he tastes."

Now let's not pretend it was the greatest wine we had ever enjoyed, or better than anything we'd ever had before. In truth there were a few poor batches along the way, but there was an openness; there was a faithfulness; and there was a willingness to respond to God in the moment. Time and learning has helped but crucially, crucially, the spirit of God has been at work and surprising all of us.

Our churches reimagine some of the ways in which we worship; of how we respond to the needs of what we're emerging in our communities. And now as the church moves out

online, and reconsiders its purposes and nature, we're faced with a challenge: how do we celebrate this? The possibility of this being a season of new fresh wine and not an offering of diluted vinegar.

I think the key is there in the jars, and the water poured into them.

Those stone vessels stand ready and into them water was poured, and the water's crucial. In another encounter in the Gospel of John just moments later, Jesus will again draw attention to water: this time to the water of life. And that water of life flows in the veins of the church Catholic. It's the very spirit of God who transforms bread and wine into the mystical body of Christ, and the people of God into the body of Christ in the world.

So what does it mean for us today to see that water of life, transformed by the command of Jesus, into a new wine? What if this is the moment, when the old wine of decades and centuries, is seen as that which has sustained our celebration of being church, of being the bride of Christ, and now the water of life is being transformed again into something new, and renewed? And to allow us to be the best we can be in this time. How does that let us echo the voice of the steward, and celebrate the wine we now have to share?

The church of today and tomorrow is the church that faces its colonial past; its divisive stories; its prejudices; its sexism and homophobia; its failings about the vulnerable in our midst. That recognises its complacencies, and is open to the opportunity to be renewed again.

Will we embrace that? Will we see today and all our tomorrows as a new day in which to celebrate a new way?

And none of that calls for a rejection of our essential essence. The water of life is still fresh within us, but by the word of God, it will become again even more sweet and beautiful. And I want to invoke a poet that I suspect will make an appearance in many sermons this morning. Amanda Gorman's, whose wisdom was shared at a presidential inauguration.

"We did not feel prepared to be the heirs
Of such a terrifying hour.
But within it we've found the power
To author a new chapter,
To offer hope and laughter to ourselves.

So while once we asked,
how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe?
Now we assert,
How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?"

"For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it."

Amanda Gorman - The Hill We Climb

Now I note caution. We are not the source nor author of this new chapter, but we are participants in it.

But we are here, to see the light that always shines in the darkness, and that the darkness cannot master.

The wedding feast presents us with fear, and anxiety, a seeming failure, that Jesus presents us with the gift of transformation; the possibility of water become wine.

Water into wine, my lord done something fine
He saved my soul and gave me peace of mind
Now there's no cause for worry, everything is fine
Ever since he came and changed my water into wine

The Handsome Family - Water Into Wine

In this time of prayer for the church and her unity, let us know that it is Christ that takes this moment.

Our history, our divisions, our fears, and our disappointments, and transforms them. This Methodist looked forward to that drink, and I hope it's one we can share together. Amen.