

## Heaven in Ordinary

Sermon preached at Pusey House on the Second Sunday after  
Epiphany 2015 by the Principal, the Rev'd Dr George D.

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*But thou hast kept the good wine until now. This beginning of signs did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him.*

Epiphany means a shining forth or manifestation, and during these Sundays of the season of Epiphany we consider the shining forth of the divine life in humanity. We consider manifestation of divine life first in the Lord Jesus, God and man, secondly in the members of His body, the Church, and then, in all the world. We desperately need this light, this manifestation. It is terribly difficult to see the world and ourselves clearly, in a proper light, a light which heals as well as reveals. In the shadow of the Charlie Hebdo massacre, there has been a lot of discussion about free speech. The attack in Paris is an attack on free speech, and the general, though not universal, view is that we in UK, like French, are champions of free speech. And yet, last term, when 'Oxford Students for Life' wished to host a debate in one of the colleges on the provocative question of the harm caused by 'abortion culture' it was effectively shut down and cancelled due to student protest and catch-all excuse - safety. This suggests that there may be

something wrong with our self-understanding as champions of free speech. The statement, ‘they have no wine’ describes human condition, need for light and truth, not just a wedding breakfast problem.

Also this past week, a book was published where Archbishops of Canterbury and York criticise government for appearing to tolerate a growing social and economic inequality. The Archbishops argue that poor are left behind and even entire cities forgotten. The accuracy of diagnosis has been challenged of course. Painting a picture of destructive consumerism and individualism, Archbishop of York John Sentamu asks the basic question - how has God created us, for what purpose? ‘Has God created us to be people who go to Black Friday sales to fight with each other because they want the biggest bargain?’ This is, of course, part of the problem when it comes to diagnosing social problems – if we cannot say what human beings are meant for, what the big purposes are, we can hardly recognize let alone fix problems. And this is not true just when we look outward, but when we try to order our own lives in midst of competing priorities, stretched with too much to do or not enough time or money, what are we meant for?

The Gospel for today helps us to see both the big picture and gives us help with the details. St John describes miracle as the beginning of signs, and this beginning of signs shows why God

has taken on human nature, and how we too come to share in the divine life. The sign helps us to see what we are made for.

Celebration of Epiphany connected with 3 different manifestations of divine life

-The visit of the Magi, to worship and offer gifts which point to Kingship of Christ, his divinity, and even his death

-On the Epiphany also Christ is manifest in his baptism, the Father who spoke word in beginning of all creation, declares Lord Jesus to be beloved son and the Spirit descends.

-Then there is this third miracle, the transformation of water into wine.

St Augustine suggested that one of the surprising things about this miracle is that it seems strange to us. Augustine writes: "When our Lord turned the water into wine, He was but doing the very same thing which He does every year in every grape of every vintage: the waters from above nourish the vine-tree, and are taken up into the fruit, and turned by His secret power into that juice of the grape, which becomes to us wine. In the miracle, the veil is lifted up, and we see more clearly the Son and Word of God as the one who sustains and orders the whole creation.

This beginning of signs is one of the most dense of signs – in some ways the whole Gospel is compressed in this one miracle.

It is no accident, no happen-chance, that the Son of God performs his first miracle at a wedding. He is, in himself, a kind of marriage – in the Incarnate Son of God the divine life is married to human life. And as one of the basic purposes of marriage is to generate new life through the gift and birth of children, so it is with the marriage of the human and divine in Christ. The union of the divine and human in Christ overflows into new life. The divine Son does not take on human nature to give himself something that he needs, the Eternal Word was not incomplete or lacking before the Incarnation. But the Son marries to Himself human nature so that the divine life may overflow through Him into human life.

The great theologian of the Divine Lord, Bernard of Clairvaux, makes the point succinctly and beautifully: *"It was a truly great sign of divine power, that at the word of the Lord water is changed into wine. But there is a more amazing change accomplished by the hand of the Almighty which is prefigured in this wonder. For we, all of us, are invited to a spiritual wedding, in which the Bridegroom is none other than Christ the Lord. In the psalm we read that "He as a bridegroom comes out of his chamber ... Of this Spiritual wedding, we are the Spouse, all together we are one Spouse in the body of Christ, and each single one of us is a Spouse."*

[Toal, Sunday sermon, Vol. 1 p 282]

This is the great promise to which Dr Pusey returned again and again: *'that [Christ has] so taken our poor nature into Himself,*

*that in Him it is In-Godded, [deified], ... Human nature, the last of the first creation, is made 'the Union between God and His creatures!'*

Pusey continues, language straining to express the wonder of the mystery in which all things are taken up: *For in him Who is the Mediator between God and man, being Very God and Very Man, shall all things, "both which are in heaven and which are in earth," be gathered together and summed Up in one; Angels and Saints shall together be in-oned being together indwelt by the Ever-Blessed Trinity, in "the Church, which is His Body, the fullness of him that fillet all in all."*

While this is a theological point, a statement about God and about God's purpose for humanity, it is not just an abstract point. The Epistle offers a wonderful description of what human life comes to look like when it is transformed by the good wine of the divine grace:

*Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; ... not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer;*

This is a simple and beautiful description of the inward transformation which is the work of divine grace in us. To love with genuineness, to show a real and deep respect for others, to

have a kind of hopeful joy in the worst kind of trials, to despise what is evil and destructive: these are pictures of the wine of divine grace.

At the same time, this description perhaps also explains why the message of is also a problem. Do we ever love without dissimulation, without a whole lot of self-interest mixed up with our love for the beloved? Abhor that which is evil – sometimes...rejoicing in hope , oh dear, it sounds wonderful, but not easily w/n our grasp

And here we come back to the words of the Blessed Virgin Mary to her Son: “*and when the wine failed, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine.*” This is a kind of metaphor for what is missing in life, for what we need in order love without dissimulation, to rejoice in hope. This is not true just on a personal level. In the commemoration of the beginning of the First World War last autumn, we were invited to recall what happens on the social and political level when there is no wine, or when the wine of grace is rejected.

But, by grace, we do have gifts; by the power of God, by God's grace, water is changed to wine. in Epistle St Paul describes some of these gifts, ‘differing according to the grace that is given to us’ Some have gifts of prophecy, some have gifts of ministry, some have gifts of teaching, and some have gifts of

exhortation. Some have gifts of giving, some have gifts of ruling, some have gifts of mercy, and some have gifts of love.

We may believe that our gifts are limited and imperfect, and no doubt they are. But in the divine economy, no good thing is lost, and no effort in the direction of virtue or truth comes back empty. This is what we are made for, to share in the divine life. The very ordinary things of day to day life become the way by which we share in the life of heaven.

Whatever effort we make to rejoice in hope offers a more clear vision of the light which strengthens all hope, in whatever measure we are able to love we don't just learn about love, we grow in love. Whatever efforts we make in study or in work, return to us with increase. The beginning of signs in the Gospel also invites us to be people capable of reading the signs, or seeing manifestations of divine wisdom in the world as well as in ourselves.

The miracle of divine exchange is at the heart of our worship this morning. We offer to God the gifts of creation, simple gifts of bread and wine, as a memorial of Christ's offering of Himself upon the cross. According to the miracle and logic of the divine economy we receive these simple gifts back in the most extraordinary way as the bread of everlasting life, and the cup of eternal salvation: '*Exalted manna, gladness of the best*' [Herbert]

The miracle of the water transformed into wine helps us to see an even greater miracle. The Bridegroom comes to the wedding feast, and here gives himself to be

*'the strengthening and refreshing of our souls: that we may evermore dwell in Him and He is us.'*

There is more encouragement in the words of the master of the feast: in words which were truer than he knew, governor of the feast tells bridegroom that normal practice is to give the best wine first, and the worse when the guests are past caring: ***but thou hast kept the good wine until now***

It often seems that the best wine, the wine of the good life of grace, is kept from us, that what we hope for is out ahead of us. It seems that before we are able to appreciate the best wine, we must first be shaped by the trial of waiting, by doubts and distress. Our Lord's waiting to the end of the feast encourages us to patient expectation, and learning to bear the trial of bearing with the different kinds of lack of good wine that are part of life.

We began by considering the problem of honesty in human affairs.

We all have to come to that moment of saying that we have no wine as the first step to receiving the wine of grace.

If we are to live faithfully in trials of the world, for others as well as for ourselves, we need to know what we are made for,

nothing less than a share in the divine life as members of a redeemed community.

*This beginning of signs did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him.*

Let us pray for the grace to confess that we have no wine, and for the faith to reach out toward the manifestation of the divine goodness and love in our lives and in the world.