

Sermon at St John the Evangelist, 19th January 2025

Rev. James Shakespeare

Lord Jesus Christ, transform the poverty of our nature through the riches of your grace + in the renewal of our lives make known your heavenly glory.

It is good text for mid-winter. A warm blanket to enfold us just when we feel most exposed to the elements. A reminder, when January blues may be in the ascendant, that all is not lost. And I mean, of course, today's Gospel; the story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee (from John 2, p. 86 in our pew Bibles). For here we are reminded that God is abundantly generous, that Jesus shows us the loving & hospitable face of God, and that in Him, the Spirit's gifts are poured out, for the benefit of all.

John the Evangelist places this story, this sign (as he calls it) right at the start of his Gospel – beyond the Prologue and opening chapter, in which Jesus is baptized and calls his first disciples – and he does it for a good reason: because it reveals, in touching and human ways, the 'new wine' of God's kingdom (his abundant gifts), which Jesus' coming ushers in. Here the hopes and dreams of Israel are fulfilled, and we glimpse a new order, a generous kingdom, in which, in & thro' Christ, all are invited to belong, to channel their gifts, and to participate: a kind of unfolding wedding banquet, in which the wine never runs dry, the guests never left uncared for – such is the gracious abundance of God's Kingdom, foretold by the prophets.

The question is, of course, how do we make sense of this vision (this divine ordering of things) when so often, almost the reverse seems to be true?

The world, as it is for many, seems (at surface level) to be modelled not on generosity, but scarcity – a lack of abundance - such that (in a perverse subversion of the Gospel) the hungry are left unfed, the poor are not clothed, strangers are not welcomed, food is not shared, and God's kingdom is not built up on earth... It is not difficult, when we read our newspapers and look out across the world through the eyes of our media, to feel discouraged. This week a peace deal was made, at long last, between Israel & Hamas, but not without months of suffering & appalling bloodshed, alongside the agony of those held hostage, such that even the U.N. have been unable to bring most of their aid, to those who need it most. In recent days we have witnessed terrifying fires in California + even parts of mainland Europe suffer unprecedented impacts of climate change, as a result of human greed & indifference.

+Tomorrow a new President will be inaugurated in the U.S., many fearing what this may mean for global solidarity—in Ukraine, the Middle East & further afield

So how do we make sense of the Gospel in a world like this – a world of greed & growing competition for scarce resources - & how do we allow God's generous abundance (as our Gospel testifies) to shape our Christian witness, our priorities, our common life, such that a different story might be told?

I have here a book, given to me by a close friend, when I was at university, by the Christian economist E F Schumacher, *'Small is Beautiful'* (originally published in 1973) – a study of economics as if people mattered. I do not claim to be an economist, but this book's analysis of what's gone wrong with contemporary society, and its suggestions as to how we might begin to remedy the situation struck a cord with this young Cambridge undergraduate.

But what struck me most of all, alongside the suggestion that what really matters is building from the local & the small-scale, is this: the idea that it is only spiritual values and the Christian belief (traditionally held) in life beyond ourselves (God, the common good, justice & righteousness) that can shape our lives in a more abundant, compassionate & sustainable direction, as followers of Jesus Christ.

'There has never been a time' says Schumacher, *'without its sages and teachers to challenge materialism and plead for a different order of priorities...'* In other words, in seeking to live a more generous and abundant life – for the sake of the common good – we need, trusting in Christ, to hold onto material things less, in order to allow God's abundance to reach out more. As says Jesus, in Matthew 6.33, *'See ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you.'* Sometimes less is more+it's only as we root our lives first in Christ + dare to recognise when we have enough, that we are given the grace to share, to reach out to one another & re-connect with God's abundance, as at Cana—that generosity which builds true community unlocking the gifts of all.

Generosity, as today's sign at Cana in Galilee reminds us (and as many stories from our ordinary lives tell us) is at the heart of the Gospel.

+Inspired by the generosity of God, who gave his only Son to save us, as well as giving the world and everything in it into our care, it is our duty & our joy to give back to God all that we are & all that we hope to be, for others.

Like the disciples, we may struggle (at times) to trust God's abundance and we may fall into the trap of often putting our own interests first; but as we dare to follow Jesus more deeply, we begin to notice a new way of being, a new reality of generosity, a new commonwealth of love – in which God's new wine mysteriously overflows (even when the jars appear empty) and makes all things new. And by learning, in faith and gratitude, to acknowledge that all we have comes from God, and entering into the deep flow of his kingdom, we begin to make God's love and his provision (both material and spiritual) real in our world.

As the American theologian Walter Brueggemann writes, *'The myth of scarcity ends in despair. It gives us a present tense of anxiety, fear, greed and brutality.'* But faith in God's abundance, as the disciples discovered, transforms our despair into hope, our anxiety into freedom, our greed into generosity, such that all may be fed. As we find throughout the Bible, the reign of God signals fullness, hospitality, generosity: like Jesus feeding the multitude, the disciples sharing goods after Pentecost, Jesus turning water into wine at Cana.

As it says in the prophet Isaiah, chapter 25 verse 6, *'On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, or well-aged wines strained clear. +He will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples... he will swallow up death forever.'*

We need, I believe, in this new year, to reflect on what God's gracious abundance means for us here – at St John's, in our Christian witness, thro our many connections beyond (in health, education & wider), thro' all that has been given to us, to share—how we, in Christ, can live differently, and reach out as witnesses of God's transforming love, into a divided & struggling world.

Yes, Jesus Christ, thro' his ministry, as signified by this first miracle – this sign – of the wedding in Cana-in-Galilee, & thro' his death & resurrection, embodies the generous abundance of God, the God who, through Him & the outpouring of His Holy Spirit, makes all things new. The God who opens our eyes, reveals his glory, and leads us to believe in Him.

May we, through Jesus & trusting wholly in Him, dare to be fully alive, to rejoice in his abundance, his generosity and his gifts, freely poured out for all to share. And let me end with words of the saintly French bishop, assassinated in Algeria in 1996, Pierre Claverie, *'The reign of God is here and we are invited to enter. The door is a humble and hidden messiah whose moving force is the power of God, totally directed to the life about to be born... to liberate to give growth, to render fruitful. Human violence and power cannot compare with this quiet, life-giving force, we call it love.'*

Let us pray.

*Let the healing grace of your love, Lord Christ, so transform us,
that we may play our part in the transfiguration of the world,
from a place of suffering, death and corruption
to a realm of infinite light, joy and love.
Make us so obedient to your Spirit
that our lives may become a living prayer,
and a witness to your unfailing presence & abundant love. AMEN*