

Jesus' Joy

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Gospel: John 2:1-11

Epiphany 4

A recent obituary for Pope Benedict commented on his conviction that the essence of Christianity is pure joy, like the song of the lark which he heard singing from the altar at his ordination in 1951. His first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, was all about the joy of God's love, and he once remarked that perhaps humans, like angels, could fly a bit, if they didn't take themselves too seriously (*The Economist*, January 7th-13th, 2023).

Life, Benedict said is to be celebrated. Jesus demonstrates this from the beginning of his ministry when he joins in the celebration of life at a wedding, turning what could have been a disaster into sheer joy, creating the best wine that anyone could have imagined. We know that Jesus enjoyed a good party, and some have suggested that he and his friends could have been the reason the wine gave out. It's a good line, but that is not John's point.

When we consider this and other stories about Jesus' transformational power, the first question people tend to ask is "Did they really happen"? The best answer to that is that it is the wrong question. A better question is, "What is the truth in these stories and what do they tell us about God and about ourselves"?

In today's story Jesus does something quite outrageous. We don't know how many guests there were at the wedding, but we learn that there were six jars, each holding 20 or 30 gallons. That's somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons of wine, not counting the original amount provided by the groom. This suggests that Jesus had a healthy disrespect for respectability. He wanted the guests, as he often wanted the Pharisees - to loosen up on virtue and celebrate a joyous occasion. So, we may ask ourselves which is the greater miracle: turning water into wine, or turning gloomy people into joyful people? Whether or not Jesus literally turned water into wine, it is surely sinful for us to turn the wine of life into water. Life is to be celebrated. In all its God given wholeness it is to be enjoyed.

Jesus first visits people not in their sorrow but in their joy. This may come as news to those who think of Jesus as "a man of sorrows and

acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). Yes, there were times of sorrow, but the truth is there is also a great deal of joy and yes, humour in Jesus' life and ministry.

When we think of aspects of Jesus' personality, some of the words that come to mind are kind, thoughtful, passionate. We don't usually think of him as amusing, but look again. Jesus had a sharp wit and often displayed a lively sense of the absurd. He was a genius at using unforgettable images to convey his messages: "It is easier for a Rolls Royce to get through a revolving door than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven". And he loved poking fun at the Pharisees: "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel". This is particularly funny as wordplay in Aramaic: "You filter out a *galma*, but gulp down a *gamla*. One can imagine his listeners laughing with each other and going home to tell their families, "Jesus was in great form today. Have you heard the one about straining a *galma* and swallowing a *gamla*"?

He loved telling stories, particularly those that left his listeners shaking their heads: God is like the man who, when his friend comes knocking at midnight says, "Go away. You'll wake up the children", and only when the friend continues banging on the door does he finally stagger down stairs with his hair awry and his dressing gown on backwards, and gives the friend what he wants just to get rid of him. Or God is the crooked judge who is too busy writing his memoirs to be bothered with the woman who is being sued by the gas board, but finally gives in just to get some peace. Does God answer our prayers? "If your ten year old asks for a goldfish, do you give him a scorpion? If he asks for an ice cream do you give him a black eye"? It's almost as if he is saying, "Ask a foolish question and you'll get a foolish answer.

Paul was the first one who dared express this aspect of Jesus and his ministry when he wrote to the Corinthians about the folly of the Gospel. "Has not God not made foolish the wisdom of the world"? He writes. Does Jesus not make foolish the pious fixations of the Scribes and Pharisees?

And there were times when Jesus himself understood the sometimes tragic comedy of his own life. He was born in a stable, alongside cows and chickens. The people of Nazareth, whom he had grown up with, worked and played with drove him out of town, intending to throw him off a cliff. "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Physician, heal yourself", he said, recognising the absurdity of a carpenter's son presenting himself as God's Son, the Christ (Luke:4:23).

And then there was the seeming absurdity of some of the things said to the crowds: “I have come to bring good news to the poor”, when he himself was a poor as a church mouse. “Blessed are the meek”; you know, those people who daren’t say boo to a goose. “Love your enemies”; “Turn the other cheek”. Why? So that you can be walloped all over again? “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up”. What on earth is he talking about? He’s a carpenter’s son, not an ecclesiastical architect. “And blessed is the one who takes no offence at me” (Matt. 11:5-6), which most of those in authority certainly did.

“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. but to those of us who are being saved it is the power of God”. Even at the end, as he sat down for his last meal with his friends, while showing a serious and occasionally melancholy side, Jesus refused to be overcome with sadness or despair: “Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world”, he said, as Pilates’s soldiers lay in wait for him outside.

“I have said these things ... that your joy may be complete”. Jesus came into the world to bring healing, redemption and joy to this sad and sinful world – the great physician who makes the wounded whole, by his own wounds. He, who at the beginning of his ministry turned water into wine for guests at a wedding, turns his own blood into wine for the salvation of us all – the best for the end. “This is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins”.

So, with joyful hearts, let us drink and be thankful.

Amen

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St. Mary’s, Holmbury
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