

The Third Sunday of Epiphany

*St Mary the Virgin, St Briavels, and St Mary Magdalen,
Hewelsfield, 2024*

*Revelation 19:6-10
John 2: 1-11*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

We are still in this lovely season of Epiphany, if you like the coda, or the repeated refrain of Christmas. Our worship is still very much focused on the truths and mysteries of Christ coming amongst us as a baby in Bethlehem, and being revealed to the nations at Epiphany.

But just for a moment the baby has disappeared, and last Sunday and this we are very much in the presence of the grown man Jesus. You'll remember that last week we heard of the calling of the very first disciples, as Jesus walked by the lakeside. And today we meet him in a really domestic setting, he, and his mum, and his friends have all gone to wedding. Something that probably most if not all of us here have done more than once, and possibly dozens of times. You have to try and find your suit, or your hat, in the back of the wardrobe.

Next week, just for one Sunday, we revisit the baby, as we keep the lovely Feast of Candlemas, the last day of the Christmas season, but other than that we are now in the part of church's year when we are walking alongside, if you like, Jesus the man, as he moves around through Galilee, and undertakes his ministry. This ministry that Scripture tells us was about three years long, and which leads of course to the events of Holy Week and Easter, which is only eight weeks or so away now.

And isn't it rather lovely, this morning, to encounter Jesus doing something so apparently normal as going to a wedding with his friends and family. We have no idea whose wedding it was. We know that it was in Cana, although nobody really knows where Cana was, and local scholars identify four potential villages or towns where this might be, all of them within reasonably easy commute from the villages around the Sea of Galilee.

And then we have this extraordinary miracle. John, as we heard, counts this is the first of what he refers to as Jesus' 'signs', out of a total of seven signs that he describes in his gospel. So in a sense this is marking the beginning of a public ministry. I think it is really interesting that Jesus doesn't seem to have gone to the wedding in order to do this amazing miracle. In fact it's his mum who comes up to him and tells him that the wine is run out, and he replies rather rudely actually. I'd expect a bit of a clip round the ear if I spoke that way to my mum! It seems that Jesus had gone to the wedding to celebrate with his friends who are getting married, but this opportunity presents itself, and we have this miraculous transformation of a very great deal of water set aside for ritual washing, into a very great deal of reputedly rather fine wine.

And you'll have heard sermons about this many times, about quite how much water there was, and people often preach about this being a lovely symbol of the generosity and lavishness of God's love. Jesus doesn't just produce another six bottles of house red. He produces hundreds of gallons of rich, fine, Chateau neuf du Pap, better than that which has come before. And there's lots in there about God's generosity, and about the richness of the life that Christ invites us into. And the prayers of this season talk a lot about that. One of them says, "in the water made wine the new creation was brought to perfection at the wedding feast. Poverty was turned into riches."

But just for a few moments this morning before I finish I'd like to draw our attention to another aspect of today, and that's the fact that Jesus was at a wedding. Weddings have been used in the Christian tradition, and marriage crops up all the time in the Bible, as a way of teaching about the relationship between God and his people. Those of you who can remember, perhaps you were even married according to, the Book of Common Prayer service, will recall that at a wedding the priest traditionally says, "marriage is an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence, and the first miracle that he wrought, in Cana of Galilee." Remember that? The modern service is less romantic, but does say similar things. The words used at Emma and my wedding, using the modern service, were, "marriage is a way of life made holy by God, and blessed by the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ with those celebrating a wedding at Cana in Galilee. It is a sign of unity and loyalty... It enriches society and strengthens community."

Human marriage is used by Scripture, and blessed by Jesus's presence, to tell us something about relationship. It is aspirational, if you like. And of course we all know that human marriages are sometimes very difficult, sometimes they fail. So they are not a perfect image of our relationship with God, and God's relationship with us, but they do share some similarities. Because they are to do with sharing your life with someone else.

So marriage is one image of the relationship that God would like to have with us. That's why all over the Bible, and all over the tradition, we have this image of the church as the bride of Christ. Which is what you get in Revelation. Think back again to our first reading. "The marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready... Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."

Those visions in Revelation of prophecy, they are a glimpse into the reality of the relationship God desires with his people. And it is a relationship as close, closer, than a marriage. We as God's people are the bride, with God as the bridegroom. One of the traditional vestry prayers that is said before the Ministers enter church finishes with the line, "behold the bridegroom calls. Let us go to meet him."

And we are, of course, right in the middle of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This octave, this eight-day period every January, where we pray even more than normal for the unity, for the healing, the reunification of the church. Because we are supposed to be Christ's bride. We are supposed to be a people overwhelmed with love for a God who is so generous that he lavishes upon us not just a drop of wine, not just a dribble, but gallons and gallons and gallons of the very richest of his blessings. That's our calling. To respond to that sort of love as a bride. And we mar and confuse and dilute that response with our division.

That's not to say we should be identical to each other. To paraphrase Blackadder, 'it would be a poor look out Christians the world over if every Christian was identical to me'. Variety is good. Texture is good. Division is not. Divided churches make bad brides.

So we give thanks today for God's generosity. For that lavish, outrageous, generosity. We pray for our unity, as the bride of Christ, that our loving, our honouring of each other might grow to reflect, and proclaim to the world, that mystical union that is 'betwixt Christ and his church.'

Amen.