



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Epiphany 3

Revelation 19.6-10

John 2.1-11

Like all of us during last year, and particularly during lockdown, I have had more time. I was sent a video today about what we are free to do in lockdown. It has a series of beautiful pictures with words like, 'hope, kindness, prayer etc. is not locked down' and it ends with the word Amen.

Some of the popular reports on television at the moment are about people who are offering us ideas of what we can do with our time when confined to the house. One man has perfected the art of origami. He teaches youngsters and old people, it is very therapeutic. Some of his creations are remarkable, particularly the skeleton of a brontosaurus all made from paper!

Well I haven't developed a skill like that but it has given me time to rest and to read (and do housework!) I also have enjoyed various television programmes. I have always enjoyed programmes about our native wildlife; 'Winterwatch' is back on our screens albeit under lockdown restrictions. Wildlife has flourished while humans are not around to interfere with it.

Years ago now there was a remarkable two part programme on BBC called, 'Wild Ireland, the edge of the world,' with Colin Stafford Johnson. I recorded it and have watched it many times since. I did so the other day before writing this Reflection. Johnson is rowing a currach, a traditional Irish boat, along the west coast of Ireland stopping at various locations on route. His journey begins at the Skellig Rocks.

I have long been fascinated by Skellig Michael. It is a huge rock jutting out of the Atlantic. On top of it is a Celtic monastery complete with crosses and beehive huts. Now it is a world heritage site and it is closed to the public to protect it. Johnson was privileged to film there, even taking the viewer inside one of the still complete stone huts.

The link between our readings and the Celtic huts on Skellig Michael is that those early Irish Christians chose to settle in places on the boundaries where they believed that the veil between heaven and earth was very thin. There is nothing between Skellig Michael and the continent of America. To people then it was just a vast empty ocean stretching to infinity. Other such 'thin' places

were Iona and Lindisfarne. When one old woman from the Northern Isles was asked where heaven was she reputedly replied, 'A few feet above our heads.' For 'heaven' read the presence of God. It was in those places that they felt near to their creator.

Well our readings are like that. Our gospel reading ends with the words, 'Jesus did this, the first of his signs in Cana of Galilee.' It is interesting that the word sign is used, a sign points us towards something. All Jesus' miracles or signs point towards God, he is always very specific about this.

The turning of the water into wine always reminds me of an assembly a fellow member of staff did when I was teaching. There was a large empty beaker on the table and a huge bottle of clear water. He poured the water dramatically into the beaker and lo and behold to everyone's amazement it turned red! Of course as he explained the beaker contained crystals. He went on to talk very memorably about the reality of Jesus' first miracle that was anything but an illusion.

The gospel reading follows on from the calling of Nathaniel. Jesus has said to him, ⁵⁰ 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' ⁵¹And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.' This is a time when the veil between heaven and earth is very thin, each time we see one of Jesus' signs the angels are metaphorically going between heaven and earth. Think of the baptism of Jesus and the voice that calls.

In fact Cana is the village of Nathaniel, and as a hugely important event most of the villagers would be invited to a wedding. We are told Jesus and his disciples had been invited together with Mary, his mother. We see little of her in St. John's gospel. She will appear in that oh so human and touching scene as she stands at the foot of the cross.

A wedding nowadays is planned up to two years ahead and often thousands of pounds are spent on it because it is one of the most important events in life. In Jesus' time in the same way, the wedding would be hugely important, a time when nothing must go wrong.

The ceremony would take place in the evening after a feast. At the end of that day the couple would be escorted to their new home in the darkness of night in a torchlight procession, hence the story of the bridesmaids and their lamps.

The couple would then remain at home for a week and keep open house. They would wear crowns and be treated like Kings and Queens. In lives that were usually full of poverty, this week of feasting and rejoicing would indeed be wonderful.

We don't know the details of this wedding but Mary seems to be central. Imagine the catastrophe of having no wine when you want everything to be perfect. In Jewish society wine was essential. They had a saying, 'Without wine there is no joy.' It was a sacred duty to provide for the guests correctly; the disgrace to the bride and groom of wine giving out would have been horrific.

When Mary told Jesus about the lack of wine his reply sounds brusque at best, at worst dismissive. But actually the word 'woman' can simply mean, 'lady' and we remember it was one of his last words, 'Woman behold your son,' as he hands her into the care of John. So actually, translated, the phrase can simply mean, 'Lady don't worry about it anymore leave it all to me.' Hence Mary's reply 'Do whatever he tells you.'

What is so important here are the words, 'My hour has not yet come.' This takes us right to Calvary and Jesus' giving his life for us. The turning of the water into wine is not just the first 'sign' of Jesus which points us to God, it is deeply symbolic.

Jesus takes control of the situation, notice as is typical of St. John, the details mentioned in the account, even to the capacity of the water jars. The water becomes wine, wine that is 'the best.'

We remember the wine of the last supper. 20'And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." Luke 22.

And 1 Corinthians 25 when St. Paul writes,

²⁵'In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Notice also how the account begins, 'On the third day.' this reminds us of the day of Resurrection, 'On the third day he rose again for us,'

The jars are for purification, just look at the words from John 1. 7 'but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son purifies us from all sin.'

This story, when analysed, has such deep symbolism within it. The water is transformed into wine. Jesus transforms us if we accept him and follow him by living in his way. Our lives are literally enriched, turned into wine. Not only this but we should by our behaviour, take Christ's transforming love to others.

The link with the reading from Revelation is of course the image of the wedding. There is quite a lot in the gospels about weddings and I have dealt with them in Reflections. They refer to the wedding banquet where Jesus is the bridegroom.

At the beginning of this Reflection I spoke about 'thin places' where earth and heaven meet. When Nathaniel meets Jesus he is quite literally in a thin place, he is in the presence of Jesus, God incarnate. Here John, writing of his visions on the Island of Patmos is at the place where heaven and earth meet too.

He is writing of the final triumph of God over evil,

'Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God

the Almighty reigns.

⁷ Let us rejoice and exult

and give him the glory,

The imagery is of Christ's wedding banquet. Think of Jesus' parables Matthew 22. 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son,' and Matthew 25, the story of the bridesmaids where obviously Christ is the bridegroom. The imagery is the same here,

'for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;

⁸ to her it has been granted to be clothed

with fine linen, bright and pure'—
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.'

We really need to go back to the beginning of the bible. Israel is seen as the bride. This imagery is often used in the scriptures. Throughout the history of God's people the Jews and the accounts of their relationship with God in the scriptures, God had remained faithful to them. His promises were made in the covenants he made with them. These are like wedding vows. These promises he always kept, it was they who were unfaithful. Again and again they strayed and, 'Did evil in the sight of the Lord.' God's love was constant. God came to earth at the incarnation in the person of Jesus,' the word made flesh,' He is the promised Messiah, the One for whom the Jews had been waiting for so long. The final covenant is completed at Calvary sealed in Christ's blood, 'This is my blood of the new covenant.' For those who have eyes to see him and follow him, God gives the full reward.

This reading describes the final wedding banquet and Christ is the bridegroom. All who remain faithful to him are invited to his banquet through grace and are co heirs with him and inheritors of God's love and promises.

And the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' The church is the bride, and the fine linen prepared for the bride is the righteous deeds of the saints'.

We are all invited to the wedding banquet of Jesus. We are all required in our behaviour to live out God's way.

In our reading John admits that in his excitement he begins to worship the angel who brings the news!

'You must not do that! I am a fellow-servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.'

It is a lesson for all of us, only God must be worshipped. We remember Luke 4 and Jesus' temptation by the devil in the wilderness.

'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'

This is where humanity has fallen down badly, running after other gods and worshiping them whatever they may be. No, for those who follow Jesus the only true worship is of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As St John writes in the opening of his gospel.

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.'

Jesus is our God, the second person of the trinity. He is the one who is, 'worthy of worship,' not just in our praise of him but in our lives. 'I am a fellow-servant with you and your comrades who hold the

testimony of Jesus.’ We are comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus and people will look at us and expect our actions to bear out our words.

Jesus will come at the new creation to rule as king and bridegroom at the final wedding banquet of God.

No wonder John rejoices as he writes this passage of Revelation.

On Monday we celebrate the Conversion of St. Paul. This is inextricably linked to these two readings. It is about change. There, more than anywhere is an example of Jesus turning water into wine! Paul, from being someone who persecuted the ‘Followers of the Way’ was transformed by Jesus into the greatest Christian missionary and writer ever.

Paul, who witnessed and held the coats of those who stone Steven, who set out on his journey, ‘breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord’ is stopped in his tracks on the Damascus Road.

This man turns from sin and turns to Christ. Indeed he is a prime example of someone who is purified by Jesus, whose sins are forgiven and whose life is turned upside down.

He follows his Lord to the end and dies for his faith. His writings shaped the faith of the fledgling churches then and have shaped belief throughout history.

He indeed is a ‘fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus,’ to echo those words from our passage from Revelation.

At our baptism we too, ‘turn from sin and turn to Christ,’ we need to let Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit purify us and turn us from water to wine.

‘Spirit of the living God fall afresh on me, melt me, mould me, fill me, use me, Spirit of the living God fall afresh on me.’ Daniel Everson.

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