

SUNDAY 21 JANUARY 2024 – EPIPHANY 3 – Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (18-25 January)

Genesis 14.17-20

Revelation 19.6-10

John 2.1-11

Today finds itself in the middle of a week which in the Church is now universally known as The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The title may even give cause for ridicule or scorn, especially in view of the Anglican Communion's current problems, but it's important to remember we are not **celebrating** Christian Unity but **praying** for it. The worldwide Church is a human institution, inspired by God and his son Jesus Christ and his message to us to love God and all our neighbours, difficult though this may be as we look around us here and in the world, especially at this current time. What then are we praying for? To answer the question we have to look at the actions and words of Jesus as he begins his ministry.

The miracle at the wedding in Cana of Galilee is certainly one of the more well-known miracles performed by Jesus during his three years' ministry, and it is the very first one. It almost takes him by surprise when Mary his mother asks him to do something about the wine supply having run out, so that all he says in effect is "so what – I'm not ready yet". Nevertheless Mary is confident, being of course exclusively aware of where Jesus has come from. She initiates what happens next, perhaps because she has noticed that the arrival of Jesus and his friends could well have contributed to the wine running out. On Jesus's instructions six enormous waterpots (which would already have been used for cleaning hands and vessels) are filled with water, which on being poured out is seen to be wine, and very fine wine it is too. The steward recognises the quality of it and congratulates the bridegroom, but of course only the servants Jesus spoke to know what has passed between Mary and her son. So the

wedding party continues in good spirits, completely unaware of what has been going on in the background.

Our Gospel passage ends with the sentence “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him”. For us, knowing the story of what later happened to Jesus, this miracle has (to use a popular word) iconic importance. Why ?

Just over 30 years ago a new church was founded in Woolwich, southeast London, and it decided to call itself New Wine Church. Its primary focus is to enable church leaders to communicate effectively the good news of God’s promises in this generation. It emphasises that being a Christian isn’t a life to be lived completely alone, but is a life to be lived in community, within effective and loving family and other relationships. In giving their church the name New Wine, they are recognising the secondary meaning or meta-message of the sign which Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee two thousand years ago. This other meaning represents firstly the change brought about by the touch of Jesus Christ on our lives, and secondly it represents the reminder that there is always more and better still to come.

Most of us (including me) like to advertise what is best about ourselves. When we meet people for the first time, we come across as friendly, considerate and so on; but as they come to know us, and especially if they have to live with us, they have to put up with the less good, or even worse. But in the Christian life, in our dealings with God, it’s not like that. As we deepen our relationship with him, which is revealed to us through Jesus Christ, we find ourselves saying over and over again “Thank you, Lord. You have kept the good wine until now”.

This is what lies in store for children and also adults, thanks to their parents and in the case of adults their friends, who are bringing and accompanying them to be baptised and even confirmed. Children’s parents will be making commitments on their behalf, and the children will

have an opportunity of firming that up at a later stage in their lives. There are some parents who decline to do this on the grounds that children should decide for themselves which way they want to go when they are old enough to understand, as happens now much more often with adults. Recently I was really impressed to meet an 11 year old girl (from a non-churchgoing family) visiting her sick grandfather in hospital. She had decided on her own initiative she wanted to be baptised/confirmed and had chosen her own godparents. Christians learn to know that being a Christian does not make you immune from negative experiences, but it is the knowledge that Jesus himself suffered on the cross for us and therefore knows what it is to suffer, that is the most comforting and most real aspect of the Christian life. In this knowledge we too welcome new Christians of all ages into the Christian family here. You have probably seen the notice in the parish news about this, and if you think you would like to explore further, please do speak to Fr Nigel. We pray God to open hearts and minds in the future, to see just how good this new wine is.

So we pray today and throughout this whole week for the Holy Spirit to help us and all churches to understand God's loving purposes, even if those purposes sometimes seem obscure, or have become clouded: it is a particular tragedy that two Christian churches whose countries are at war with each other should undermine the message by hurling insults at each other. God's paramount purpose for us humans and indeed for all creation, in sending himself to us in the form of a human being, was to remind us of the way in which he always wanted us to live our lives, namely with love in our hearts at all times and in all places. I can't think of a better or more loving gift that parents could give their children, or Christians their friends, because it is a gift for life: in fact it is the gift of life.

