

THIRD SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY 2019
St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle.

In the year 1691, Purcell's opera **King Arthur** was first performed. The libretto was by our first Poet Laureate, John Dryden. Towards the end of the work comes a song by Venus in honour of Britannia. The first few lines are as follows:

**Fairest isle, all isles excelling,
Seat of pleasures and of loves;
Venus here will choose her dwelling,
And forsake her Cyprian groves.**

I must admit that I know nothing more of this work but, from those lines, it does seem as though the poet is inviting us to anticipate this land becoming an Arcadian Idyll in which a kind of innocent, pleasing, human, romantic love will flourish, and all shall be well.

**Fairest isle, all isles excelling,
Seat of pleasures and of loves;
Venus here will choose her dwelling,
And forsake her Cyprian groves.**

This dream of a worldly Paradise would have caught the popular, possibly sentimental imagination. The words would have been remembered.

About fifty years later, Charles Wesley composed and published what is now a very well-known hymn. There can be little doubt that Dryden's verse was in Wesley's mind when he wrote:

**Love Divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down.**

Wesley attempts to lift our eyes upwards to a greater love than Dryden seems to celebrate – the love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ.

**Love Divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down.**

I suppose it is the responsibility of all Christian evangelists, preachers and teachers to try to lift our eyes upwards that so, to use the words of the Prayer Book Collect, **our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found.**

Certainly, this is the case with St John the Evangelist, the author of the Fourth Gospel. And this morning's second lesson illustrates it perfectly. The account of the Wedding at Cana is astonishingly rich in allusion and symbol. For now, I shall unravel but one single thread.

Jesus is at a wedding when the wine runs out. "Without wine," said the Rabbis, "there is no joy."

The relationship between God and Israel was often thought of as a kind of marriage, of which each human marriage could be a sign. But the joy had gone out of it. Joy of course, not as levity

or frivolity or fun, but as a sense of profound well-being; the very absence of dis-ease in any of its various modes.

The wine had run out. There was no joy. But Jesus, our evangelist seems to say, is the source of new joy in the marriage; the relationship between God and human beings.

St John tries to lift our eyes upwards to Jesus Christ so that **our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found.**

But even so, how do we discover real joy in Jesus Christ? How does he restore to us a sense of profound well-being in our relationship (our 'marriage' you might say) with God?

Charles Wesley goes to the heart of it immediately. Jesus Christ is the embodiment and revelation of:

**Love Divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down.**

Our joy, that sense of profound well-being, the very absence of dis-ease in any of its various modes, is rooted in our acknowledgement and acceptance of God's enduring love for us, as expressed through every word and deed of Jesus Christ. In and through him, **our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found.**

But is that the end of it? Having seen, acknowledged and accepted the enduring love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, do we now sit back contentedly – not to say complacently – in a kind of spiritual cocoon? Of course, this is not the *end* of it, but only the *start* of our discipleship; of our exploration into all that Jesus Christ reveals. Our pilgrimage has only just begun.

The shining through the life of Jesus of the enduring love of God is what, from time to time in his Gospel, St John the Evangelist describes as Christ's 'glory'.

From the days of St Paul onwards, Christians have understood that the contemplation of that 'glory' (of the revelation of God's love) changes them – re-shapes and re-forms them as the years go by; moulds them more and more into the likeness of Christ so that, in their turn, they become channels of his glory.

St Paul wrote: "We all, with open face, beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory" Wesley must have had those words from the King James Version of the Bible in mind when he wrote the last lines of his now famous hymn.

**Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise.**

The end of it all will be our being **Lost in wonder, love and praise.** Wesley took the words from an earlier hymn by Joseph Addison. Some of you will know it. It begins with the lines:

**When all thy mercies, O my God,
My rising soul surveys,
Transported with the view, I'm lost**

In wonder, love and praise.

The Christian life is a journey in the course of which, if **our hearts are surely fixed where true joys are to be found**, that is upon God's love for us revealed through Jesus Christ, we shall be made ready for heaven. However, on the way, we shall never forget our rootedness on earth. Jesus's glory, his disclosure of God's love, the glory we are called to share, was shown most in his care for the outcast and the oppressed.

Our having our eyes lifted up to heaven is certainly no cause of any abdication from our responsibility to love our neighbour here on earth. Some words from the ancient Liturgy of St James hammer home the message:

**From glory to glory advancing, we praise thee O Lord;
Thy name with the Father and Spirit be ever adored.**

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**O Lord, evermore to thy servants thy presence be nigh;
Ever fit us by service on earth for thy service on high.**

The Right Reverend David Conner, KCVO