

ST GEORGE'S WINDSOR
EPIPHANY 2 2022

As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

The words are those of the Prophet Isaiah. We heard them read earlier in this service.

As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

In hearing those words, we remember that, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, our destiny is depicted as our being in such an intimate relationship with God that it can be thought of as a marriage. God and God's people shall be united in a covenant of love. Every human marriage is therefore an intimation of (a foreshadowing of, an anticipation of) the end for which we were created. It is of course the language of metaphor, of poetry. In what other language can we express our deepest intuitions; our deep down faith?

As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

When St John composed his Gospel, he wrote it for people who had an ear for metaphor, imagery, symbol and poetry. His Gospel is astonishingly rich in allusion. An excellent example of that richness can be found in the account of the Wedding at Cana that comprised our second lesson this morning. Those of you who were here last week will recall that Canon Powell drew that account to our attention in the third part of his sermon. Today, it takes centre stage.

The messianic age, the culmination of God's plan for his people, is frequently depicted as a marriage feast. Jesus has come to celebrate the marriage; to inaugurate the messianic age. But all is not well. The wine has run out. Only water is left. There can be no celebration of the marriage.

The first readers of John's Gospel would have got the point. We cannot arrive at and embrace our destiny while we have only water.

That water of course is another symbol. It represents what might be called 'outward religion'. St John says that the water Jesus had to deal with was that used for the Jewish rites of purification. It was to do with outward cleanliness. It represented outward conformity to religious practice. As the contemporary priest-poet Malcolm Guite has put it, they are "...waters of some outer weeping, / That leave you still with all your hidden sin." The marriage, you might say, had become empty; a merely conventional display of a kind of respectability. It is what some of John's readers could have described as mere obedience to the Law.

Jesus transforms the water into wine. Those early readers of the Fourth Gospel would have been alert to all that 'wine' could represent. They might well have remembered other words of the Prophet Isaiah: At the end of time "the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,of well-aged wines strained clear."

Those wines of course constitute the freely given gift of God; God's provision. They are an expression of God's care.

Yet there is more. For the first readers of John's words, the word 'wine' would have had a fresher resonance. They would have thought of the words of Jesus at the last supper when he spoke of the wine as his blood of the new covenant, "shed for you".

The wine to be imbibed, the wine that will serve to slake our deepest thirst, is the wine of the love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ upon the Cross. That Cross reveals to us the lengths that God's love will go to; the love that is for better or for worse; the love that will never let us go. Not our outward works but rather the embracing of that freely-given love of God will be at the heart of that marriage that is our destiny.

Comparing the wine of the miracle at Cana with the waters of the rites of Purification, the poet Malcolm Guite writes:

"Better than waters of some outward weeping,
That leave you still with all your hidden sin,
Here is a vintage richer for the keeping
That works its transformation from within."

"Love" as the song says "changes everything". As Malcolm Guite writes, it "works its transformation from within".

Our Christian pilgrimage is not a matter of outward observances, though they can offer support and scaffolding along the way. Our Christian pilgrimage is to do with that transformation that comes about as we open our hearts ever more to receive the love of God. As we receive that love in its form of forgiveness, we are slowly shaped into those who forgive others. As we receive that love in its form of an answer to our cries for help, we are gradually shaped into those who hear and respond to the cries of others. As we respond to that love in its form of an undeserved gift, we are naturally moulded into more generous people.

"Here is a vintage richer for the keeping
That works its transformation from within."

As we are changed, so we contribute to the making of this world a better place, in the hope that one day heaven and earth will blend.

In St John's account of the Marriage at Cana, Jesus says to Mary, somewhat enigmatically, that his "hour has not yet come". His 'hour' of course is to be the time of crucifixion. That is the moment when his vocation to show forth the love of the Father will be fulfilled. It is to the blood of Calvary that, through the wine of Cana, John wishes to draw our attention. There, let our attention rest for that 'hour' is the channel of a love that truly changes everything.

Malcom Guite writes in his sonnet **The miracle at Cana:**

"But here and now, amidst your daily living,
Where you can taste and touch and feel and see,
The spring of love, the fount of all forgiving,
Flows when you need it, rich, abundant, free.
Better than waters of some outer weeping,
That leave you still with all your hidden sin,
Here is a vintage richer for the keeping
That works its transformation from within.
'What price?' you ask me, as we raise the glass,
'It cost our Saviour everything he has.'"

Now there is the love that changes all to wine as we journey on towards the marriage feast.

As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

