

Wedding at Cana – Joy and Giving

Beginning of the Stewardship Campaign/Parish Giving Scheme

(Isaiah 58:6-12; Phil.2:1-11; John 2:1-11)

The simplest meaning of the Cana story is this: God *likes* weddings. He likes weddings so much that He makes round about 900 bottles of fine, rich wine to celebrate one. It's as if a great big neon sign was placed over Cana saying that God has seen what he had made and lo *it is good*. As if what was happening between the lovers that day struck a deep, deep chord in the heart of God, as if their joy and his joy just rushed together in one great big gushing fountain of wine.

And the Bible says that when this happened, Jesus revealed his glory. In other words, it was this moment that suddenly showed He was God, this moment when people suddenly saw that this is what it's like when the mystery of God gets translated into a human being. You don't just get wisdom. You don't just get goodness. You don't just get power. You get *joy*: deep, big, wide, explosive, 900 bottles of rich wine joy. God *delights* in his creation. It's what he did at Cana, it's what he will do in all creation, when all things are made right.

Now, pretty much the whole point of the Gospel is that that divine delight is coming to be inside us. It began right in the heart of God. One day, it will fill the universe. But for now, as it is coming to be inside us. God takes *us*, in all our smallness, all our gone-wrongness, and makes us like Himself: big, deep, generous, and joyful. It might happen in fits and starts. It might take a long time to really get going. But that is what all this is all about. As the early Church liked to say, God became human so that you might become divine. God became human, so that you might become divine. *You* are going to be in God, *one* with God, one with that that great rush of joy, that great throbbing Yes at the heart of all things. That is the Gospel. If you are baptised. If you pray. If you turn from your sins, if you receive communion, then even now, you are on the way to glory. On the way to being perfect joy.

A good way to think of being a Christian, then, is to imagine that a little seed has been planted deep inside you, deep inside *us*. Indeed, you don't have to imagine it, because it is *true*. That's what baptism *does*. Anyway, that seed is the beginning of joy. It is going to spring into life, and it is going to grow and grow and grow. And it will push through and past all the bits of you that are not especially joyful. The bits that are scared, small, selfish. And it will turn them inside out. It will take your brooding on how others have hurt you, and make you want to love and serve them. It will take your pride and make you humble. It will take your anger, and make you a peacemaker.

And very soon, it will take your money. Your money, and all the anxious whispers that usually go with it. 'I must have more'. 'I must be careful'. 'there's never enough.' 'It's mine, I'm keeping it.' Those whispers are what stops you from being what God wants you to be. They are what makes you cling tight to what you've got. What stops joy and generosity flowing through you. What leaves you shut up in yourself, and other people poorer around you. Jesus is blunt: they are the whispers of the Devil. And you will listen either to them, or to the joy pushing up within you from your baptism. In the long run – indeed even in the quite short-run - you can't do both.

Which means, to put it very simply: if you're a Christian you will give more and more of your money away. You'll spend less and less energy acquiring it, saving it, growing it ... and more and more *using* it, using it to bring joy and life to those around you. So if you want to know how far God has got in someone's life, don't ask them how often they go to church or what they believe. Don't ask them how they pray. Don't ask them what they do to who in their bedroom, or even how they vote. All those things are of course, important. Very important. But *money* That's the thing that really has most people in its grip. That's the thing most of us find really hard. If joy has got that far, if it has reached deep into someone's bank account, if they are giving in deep, regular, committed generosity ... well then, there is a grown-up Christian.

Now that is quite easy for me to say. I have a nice salary, and a very nice – and free – house. I am sharply conscious of how easy it is to tell other people about money, and how difficult I find it – with all those advantages – to give generously. And I know that some of you already give with spectacular generosity, and that for many things are very, very difficult. House prices are insane. Wages are stuck. Gas and electricity and council tax are up. The kids have a school trip or music lessons or cubs, and the demands just keep coming in. So you might well think that it is a bit of a cheek for me stand here and tell you to give more. And indeed, you're right. Only you can know what you can or should give. I would not presume to tell you. The answer might be, for now, nothing.

Just a words of caution though. Be very, very careful about all those sensible reasons you cannot give. *Perhaps* they are sensible. Perhaps you really should not. On the other hand, remember that deep down most of us are still pretty selfish. Most of us *like to believe* the reasons we tell ourselves that we can't give more, that we can't help others. The richest people in the world often tell themselves the same sorts of stories. So be as toughly sceptical with yourself as you would be with them.

And then.... even if you can't really afford to give right now, why don't you fast? That is, why don't you give something up perhaps just that coffee you treat yourself to, or more radically even your food, all of it, for a day or two each week, and give what *that* costs? If on your existing lifestyle you can't give, how can you make your lifestyle *simpler*? Don't say, 'I can't afford to give, so I won't' – but 'I can't afford to give, so I will change my life till I can.' That might seem outrageous – but for the New Testament it is perfectly straightforward. That what's people who have realised what life is all about – becoming joy - *do*.

And what should you give *to*? This Sunday is the beginning of our stewardship campaign, where we ask people to give to the church. And indeed you should give to the church. There is no hidden pot of gold to pay for me, or the building, or any of what we do, or what the churches all across this diocese do. It has to come from you. So if you think people knowing the Gospel, learning about joy, being baptised, celebrating the eucharist ... if you think it all *matters*, then yes, you must please give to the church. If you don't, then in the not so long run it dies. I don't want to labour the point now, and there will be plenty of opportunity to explore the full picture in the Hall afterwards – but for the sermon, the key point is simple. If this Gospel of joy matters, if we want people in this place to go on hearing it, believing it, living it, then we need to pay for it. And the figures show that we need to pay quite a bit more.

But actually, God is not just interested in the Church – not just interested in religion. He is interested in the world. In the whole world becoming joy. In people having clean drinking water. In girls going to school. In the planet not being poisoned. In prisoners being treated decently, in the victims of war being healed, in the disabled having their dignity. This stewardship campaign will fail if all you do is think about the church. You need to think and pray about what bit of God's bigger Kingdom agenda He needs your money for, and give there too. And your giving to God's work there should be every bit as generous, as disciplined, as regular as your giving to it here.

One last thought. In a few moments, we'll celebrate the Eucharist. We will go again to the very heart of our religion and hear those most holy words: this is my body, given for you. This is my body, given for you. This is my blood, shed for you. Well, when you receive communion, it's as if that kind of giving catches. Indeed, not just *as if*: it really does catch. God will make it your body given for others; your blood, sweat and tears shed for others; and – oh so plainly, un mystically, straightforwardly, your *wallet* opened for others. That's what being a Christian is: being made ever more like Jesus, poured out like him in joy and love for the world. This month, this stewardship campaign, take one more step along that road. It is the way to your destiny, and it is glorious. Amen.