



Revd Ro's Reflection on Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

Year A

1 Corinthians 1.18-31

John 2.1-11

Our gospel reading is the account of Jesus at the wedding at Cana in Galilee. We have looked at St. Matthew's account of the arrest of John the Baptist by Herod and how Jesus left that area and went to Capernaum. St. Matthew tells of the calling of the first disciples, the fishermen. I remember a friend of mine went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. So much had changed so what moved her most was standing on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and just looking out across the water. That, she said, was not altered by time and she felt a very special atmosphere. She brought me a handful of pebbles from the shore and said, 'You never know who might have walked on those once upon a time.' It was a lovely thought.

Now our account moves to St. John's gospel. In St. John's account Jesus calls Philip next,
⁴³ 'The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.'
⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' (John 1)

Philip's message to Nathanael was mission and he doesn't beat about the bush. What he is saying is we have found the Messiah! I have to smile at Nathanael's typically human comment, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth!' and Philip's simple answer, 'Come and see.' Nathanael did just that and when Jesus sees him his comment sums him up.

⁴⁷ 'When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!'

What insight, what a complement! Nathanael is astounded that Jesus had known where he was before he had seen him and hails him thus, ⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'

For someone who tells it like it is and has no 'deceit' we can be sure Nathanael means what he says, so he follows Jesus. Jesus promises he will see greater signs than that. Indeed he will see greater things and so if we look at the last line of our gospel reading,

¹¹ 'Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.'

Incidentally Cana is Nathanael's village. This is Jesus' first miracle, his miracles are called signs, signs point to something and Jesus' signs always point to God. He acts in God's name and in his power, always he prays to God for power and strength, he is one with his Father.

So here we see Jesus in a very domestic scene. It is a time of joy, a time of rejoicing. It is important to focus on the fact that Jesus' first miracle is at a time of great joy, at a social event. Jesus is causing happiness. So many images of Jesus show him as sad or thoughtful but very few show him full of happiness and smiling, well he must have been here. A wedding then as now was a very important event, everyone in the village would gather. John is very specific,

² 'Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.'

Mary is present and active here. We see little of her in the gospels but she has a central role at this his first miracle. A wedding nowadays is planned up to two years ahead and often thousands of pounds is 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 parable of the bridesmaids and their lamps. They would be treated like royalty. The couple would then remain at home for a week and keep open house. In lives that were usually full of hard work and poverty, this week of feasting and rejoicing would indeed be wonderful.

We don't know any more details of this wedding except that it appears that Mary may be involved and even have some responsibility, certainly the servants obey her. The catastrophic event of the wine running out would be a deep disgrace to the couple and the family. It is Mary who points this out to Jesus.

³ 'When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' ⁴ And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.'

These words of Jesus may seem a stern rebuff but actually 'woman' can be seen as our word 'lady' and the rest as 'leave it to me.' Jesus uses the same word 'woman' to Mary at the crucifixion. This together with, 'My hour has not yet come' and the wine itself, cannot fail to remind us of the wine of the Last Supper and Jesus' words, 'This is my blood shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sins.' That takes us straight to Calvary and Jesus' life outpoured to save humanity. The next time Mary will be seen in St. John's gospel will be with the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross.

Mary does not doubt here, look at her faith in Jesus,

⁵ 'His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.'

The instructions are explicit; this attention to detail is typical of St. John's gospel as we have seen.

⁶ 'Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.'

The water would be for the hand cleansing and the washing of feet as sandals on a dusty or dirty road would necessitate that. The Jewish law demanded that hands were washed before a meal and also between courses. Water would be poured over hands too so they would need a great deal. 'So they took it.⁹ When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom¹⁰ and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.'

The water is now wine, not just any old wine but the very best. It has been transformed by Jesus. No one would need all that wine – this is about abundance. Jesus transforms the wine here as he transforms it by his words at The Last Supper, 'This is my blood poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.' There is no limit to his forgiveness, to love, to the grace of God. Also of course, the transformation applies to us and our lives, to the lives of all Christians. This is St. Paul's point to the Corinthians. Lives are transformed by the acceptance of Jesus. 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 'signs' or miracles of Jesus point to God, to the Spirit; they are times when the veil between heaven and earth become very thin. This is what Jesus is saying when he speaks to Nathanael. Everything is transformed in this story. The couple are not disgraced but are full of joy, the disciples believe in him. We will have our lives transformed by the touch of Jesus and our commission is to take that transforming love to others.

Our reading from Corinthians follows on from last week. The Corinthian church was forming factions, some saying they followed Paul, some Apollos, a Christian teacher who had witnessed in Corinth, some Peter and others Jesus. Of course this is ridiculous, they are simply following the practice of the various teachers and intellectuals and philosophers in the city who demanded their own supporters. The Church of Jesus Christ is one; Christian teachers are not rivals; they witness to Jesus Christ as the one Lord and to one God in three persons. All who witness in his name are members of Jesus Christ and speak for him. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12,

¹² 'For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body.' There were other problems too regarding jealousies, rivalry, and immoral behaviour. It is easy to think that the newly established churches were idyllic and had got it right, that they all lived according to the observation, 'See how these Christians love one another', of course this wasn't always so. They were human and from very different backgrounds with very different standards of behaviour. Paul still has a lot to teach them and they have a lot to learn.

I think the key to our passage is the line,

²⁰ 'Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?'

Remembering that, to the Corinthians debating was almost the national activity. But as I said last week the Christian message is not about traditional wisdom or logic. It's actually rather ironic and certainly with humour that Paul uses the traditional techniques of rhetoric or public debating. He can use a convincing argument as well as anyone but he uses the technique here. Look how he uses the old practice of using the juxtaposition of opposites to form his writing. He is in fact doing it to show that the story of Jesus, of God's message, simply doesn't conform to traditional 'wisdom.' Paul is writing this epistle from Ephesus, he is writing in a traditional style they would understand really

to emphasise that these clever debates were not the point. He has no need for tricks. No doubt they saw the humour and would get the point! But when Paul first went to Colossae to preach the gospel there were no clever tricks of debating. He was telling the truth of Christ and let it speak for itself. The account was anything but logical and he says so.

‘Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?’²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom,²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,’

Paul preaches of a Messiah who brings the message of God, who was executed as a common criminal. Jews would see that as a scandal, to die on a cross was public disgrace. How could the Messiah of God be executed? Of course it’s a ‘stumbling block’ to them. Only faith and trust in Jesus removes it. To Greeks its barmy, a man from Israel killed like that, who was a simple carpenter, what’s that all about? The whole thing seems like madness!

But Paul simply witnesses to Christ as he had been commissioned to do. Without the cross there is no salvation, Christ took the sins of the world on his shoulder and by love vanquished evil. He was ‘Obedient to death, even death on a cross.’ There is no clever debating, just the truth of God that speaks for itself. It is God’s power working through Paul, enabling him to deliver the message that will turn the logic of the world upside down. God, through Jesus, offers salvation to all who accept his message and turn to him.

²⁴ ‘but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.’²⁵ For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength’.

Think for a minute of the teachings of Jesus, they were entirely counter cultural. Conventional wisdom was and is, get a good job, get money, get possessions, get status and therefore power. But Jesus says give up all and follow me, he says, ‘Love one another as I have loved you.’ He is the co-creator, the Lord of all, who washed the feet of twelve poor men and who said, ‘Whoever would be great among you must be the humble servant of all.’ With God, status simply doesn’t exist; we are all his children, equally loved and equally valued. That is not conventional wisdom, but it is what St. Paul preached and what all Christians rejoice in. Where is your focus? asks Jesus. It must be on God and lives lived in his way.

God gives eternal life through Christ and a place in his newly created order. God’s power far outweighs human understanding. It is the power of God in the Holy Spirit that comes down on those first followers and transforms their lives. They are able to do things that were impossible to them before. God’s power knows no limit. Through God’s grace those who turn to Christ have salvation and eternal life through him. God’s power achieves everything, our feeble understanding is dwarfed by it.

Think now, says St Paul, God does not act in conventional ways. The conventional thing would be for only the powerful, the wise, the rich to be called, but that’s not what God does.

²⁶ ‘Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.’

Think of the disciples, poor fishermen and ordinary people, only Matthew would have been educated and he would never have been accepted in the world’s eyes because he was a sinner so beyond the pale. God does not see in conventional ways, his wisdom is way beyond ours. These new

Christians are generally ordinary people, some slaves, some women, and some poor. It matters not to God, all are equal in his eyes, there is no status. How freeing is that message to all people.

²⁷ 'But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no one might boast in the presence of God.'

Here Paul uses one of the staples of rhetoric, the juxtaposition of opposites to make his point, no doubt with a wry smile.

Think of Mary's song,

⁵¹ 'He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.' (Luke 1)

This is what the Jews would find so hard. Yet it was written into their history, the promises of God.

But the powerful do not want to lose their power nor the rich their status. Counter cultural teachings are not popular. The Greeks would not understand it either, it's foolishness to many. But to say that is to give up all chance of salvation. But says Paul, to all who do believe, to all who accept the message and live in Christ's way,

³⁰ 'He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'

As St. John puts it,

¹² 'But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,' (John 1)

Now then, says Paul, all these things are yours in Christ. Jesus' message is not that heaven is some place where we go after death, though of course we are reunited with God. The kingdom of heaven is here and now for all who turn to him and accept his message. That is what he said at the beginning of his ministry. 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

It is up to us to turn and embrace that. We do that by trying to live in his way and putting God and Jesus at the centre, by caring for others and taking out his message of love. If we do that we are walking with Jesus and the Holy Spirit is with us to strengthen and sustain us, as the psalm set for today, psalm 27 says,

'The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear.'

~~~~~