

Sunday 20th January, 2019
2nd Sunday after Epiphany - Year C

Isaiah 62:1-5
Psalm 36:5-10
1 Corinthians 12:1-11
John 2:1-11

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

I think that it is no accident that our lectionary really gives us three opportunities to celebrate the Epiphany of Christ; one on January 6th as the Wise Ones arrive at the manger to worship God in flesh, as a baby; a second occasion last week at the Baptism of our Lord, as the Spirit gives witness to who Christ is; and today - another epiphany as God is manifested in the power of the miracle at Cana. Certainly the last line of today's Gospel makes that clear to us - "this was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him."

That is, after all, what an epiphany is all about. But what is the nature of this epiphany? Put simply, I think, this epiphany is all about God's Grace. As we receive the Gospel today, we think "So this is what grace looks like!"

Grace, of course, is one of those words that, while central to our theological identity and vocabulary, is often hard for us to define, let alone describe in a concrete and meaningful way. Consider how some of the more recent and sometimes paraphrased translations have dealt with the word "grace" as it appears in a verse like Romans 3:24 - "They are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (NRSV). J. B. Phillips describes it as God's "generous dealing" with us, while Eugene Peterson's "The Message" talks about God putting us in right standing "out of sheer generosity" and talks about grace as "a gift."

Both of those translations are great attempts at making what the Christian tradition means by "grace" more concrete and accessible, of course. But in order to capture a more rounded sense of grace, I think we need look no further than this passage from John.

Because John moves us beyond the “free gift” and “generosity” sense of grace to remind us that grace also means *abundance*. Abundance - as in unbelievable, more-than-you-can-possibly-imagine, abundance.

Keep in mind, for a moment, the scene: Jesus and his disciples are at a wedding and the hosts run out of wine. Inconvenient, we will probably acknowledge, perhaps embarrassing, but is it really such a big deal? Yes. Because in that time and place, running out of wine too early isn't just a social faux pas, it's a disaster. Wine isn't merely a social lubricant, you see, it's a sign of the harvest, of God's abundance, of joy and gladness and hospitality. And so when they run short on wine they run short on blessing. And that's a tragedy.

Which is when Jesus, prompted by his mother, steps in and provides not just more wine, but more wine than the whole crowd could have drunk not only during the three days of the wedding feast, but probably across three weeks. In changing the water of those six large basins of water for purification, you see, Jesus is providing close to an additional thousand bottles of additional wine. And not only that, but as the surprised steward discovered, it's not just a cheap bottle of Chianti, but the best wine yet served.

And that, according to John, is what grace is like: an overflowing of joy, blessing, and the presence of God. That, John says, is what grace looks like.

Which seems like a timely message to hear.

Too often, I worry, we've defined the Gospel in a fairly limited way. To hear some theologians and preachers - and I'll admit that I've fallen into this trap from time to time too - Jesus lived, preached, taught, fed, cured, eventually was crucified, and was raised again by God, all for one reason - in order that God will overlook or forgive our misdeeds.

Now I hasten to add, the forgiveness of sin is a central and important element of our faith. But too often we've spoken of it, and some parts of our church continue to emphasise it as almost the *only* element of faith, as if Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were a kind of divine "eraser" for the crosses marked against us on St. Peter's ledger.

Which is why we should be thankful to John for reminding us that grace isn't only about making up for something we lack, but also providing more than we'd ever imagined or deserve. I mean, Jesus could have provided just enough wine for the party to go on, and, given that people have already been drinking for a few days, even a pedestrian bottle would have been gratefully received. But he went way, way beyond expectations to provide more and better wine than they ever could have expected.

Why? Because that's what grace looks like.

I love this miracle because I know of no other event in the gospels that creates an experience of God's grace upon grace better than the wedding at Cana. The abundance in the details of this miracle are meant to show us what grace upon grace (John 1:16) looks like, smells like, tastes like, feels like, and sounds like.

Epiphanies are embodied revelations. They are manifestations of God's presence that we should be able to sense -- with every single one of our senses. The wedding at Cana reveals that epiphanies of God are experiences of God's love, so abundant that you can sense it in every part of your body.

Grace upon grace (John 1:16) is not merely a concept but the embodiment of God's love; not an idea (up here - the head) but the experience (in here - the heart) of God's love; not something to be kept to ourselves but to go about testifying because God loves the world (John 3:16) -- which is, in the end, the real heart of Epiphany.

As we move through this year, I wonder how you, as individuals, and how we, as a community of faith, might best embody this type of abundance, this grace, in our lives? Perhaps your own New Year's resolutions might focus on how your life might encompass this abundance.

In a parish sense, one of the things that I hope we may be able to do is to be more outward-looking. Much of my focus and energy last year was spent, necessarily I think, on providing care and stability to the parish community. But I hope that this year we might, together, lift our eyes and our hearts and be more outward looking - to identify within the community around us, those who are in most need of hearing this Good News that we celebrate today.

This is the sort of thing that I hope we might engage in more and more, as we recognize our own abundance - the Grace we witness in our lives and within this community of faith - and share this abundance with others.

In the meantime, I give thanks whenever I see even the smallest signs of Jesus turning the ordinary water of our daily activities into the wine of God's kingdom on earth. Because that is what will remind us that grace is a free gift of God's generosity...and that Grace is the abundance of joy and blessing and life that are ours through Christ.

In the name of Christ. Amen.