

Sermon Notes for Epiphany 2

“and they filled them up to the brim” (Gospel)

Our blessed Lord accepted a vocation at his baptism – at least, that seems to be the start of his ministry. This is not to say that the baptism changed his status with his Father. What he was from all eternity, he did not cease to be after conception, or birth. Nor could anything be added by circumcision, or naming, or by the baptism of John. But the long period of preparation is now over.

Now the most natural model for that vocation and ministry might have been thought to be John the Baptist, and more remotely what the Jews of his time imagined the prophets to have been like. If we study Hebrews 11, we may think that some mythology had crept in - “sawn asunder” is not a fate reported in the canonical books. But the Lord did not follow that model. He chose otherwise.

Today we read of the marriage at Cana. Certainly for me, as one not at home in such events, there is a warning to receive that my taste is not endorsed by our Lord's behaviour. It is not said that this marriage was any more than a worldly event, though the minimum provision had been made for observant Jews. The Lord is not there to minister, or preach, or bless; but this is human and a social event, and he is happy to be part of it. It is good. “Rejoice with them that rejoice” is as much an obligation as “weep with them that mourn”.

We do not know the number of guests, so we do not know how much wine was made for each, or how much had already been drunk, or over how many days the marriage feast was to continue. But certainly the miracle is on a lavish scale. Not that it would be more likely to be true if it had been niggardly! For John, it expresses the generosity of the Father, as had already been seen in Creation, so now (and in the following signs in the gospel) in re-creation. It is an epiphany, a manifestation, because it forces into plain view God as he always is to his creation. But “the world was made by him, and the world knew him not”.

It is important that we understand God's way of working. Else we risk that dreadful boast “we have undone your work”! The modern mind is tempted to conceive Christianity after the pattern of a political campaign, maximising numbers, stirring up enthusiasm. That is not Christ's way. Indeed, there are many times in the reports of his ministry when he attempts to forbid publicity.

There is a manifestation, but it is not important whether most or even many notice. The ruler of the feast, the wedding guests, did not know what had happened. Did even Mary? “But the servants, which drew the water, knew.” Yes, at some level. They might conjecture magic – or even demonic powers – as the explanation. These accusations were to come. For most of those present, then, there is no obvious manifestation. The positive point which John makes is that “his disciples believed on him”. For those who had already accepted in some measure the truth about Jesus, there was a manifestation of the glory.

Intellectually, we should allow the possibility that God will produce a sign for us, though we should not demand or even expect such. We do well to realise that this sign makes transparent the blessings we have in creation; and the same is true of the feeding of the five thousand. Bread and wine (though not in our conventional order); yet we should not rush to “spiritualise” the gifts. Both the signs are in the created order and to disclose what is true of the whole created order all the time. But many will not understand. In John, the response to the bread is a desire for more bread, without the need to work for it. (And so with the water at the well of Samaria.) Signs are distorted by many recipients.

“By this time perhaps we may discern some part of the reason why this particular miracle, the turning water into wine at a marriage feast, came first among our Lord's mighty works: why it was, as St. John calls it, the beginning of miracles. It was so, because it was in an especial way a sample, a taste, a glimpse, of that power which is at the bottom of all miracles: the power which keeps up the ordinary course of the world, and works such astonishing changes in it. The turning water into wine was, as I said, a sample of this power, exercised as it is every year in the growth of the vine: and next, it was especially fitted to be the first miracle, because it was a type and figure of the great work, on which our Lord was now publicly to enter, the renewing of lost mankind: and it was so ordered in all its circumstances, as to give us all much instruction, how we should work under Christ, and follow His steps in that great work. When we think of this marriage feast in Cana, let it put us in mind that Jesus Christ is in our feasts, is with us wherever we are, and in all that we do, turning our water into wine, our earth into heaven, if we prevent Him not by our sins.” (Keble)

The sermon relates to the Gospel for the Sunday