

Epiphany 2, 9th Jan 2022
St Mary Abbots
John 2:1-11, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11
Father Christopher

How many bottles of wine do you think you'd need for an average wedding? [hold up bottle]

As a natural starting point/procrastination tool in preparing this sermon I Googled how much wine you need for a wedding. There is a whole range of answers to that question, as you might expect. One website, called, rather inelegantly, Wino Woman, said that, and I quote, '*sparkling wine (champagne, cava, prosecco, etc.) is mainly used for toasting the happy couple. I usually recommend 2 glasses per guest.*' 2 glasses per guest?! This does not sound like any wedding I've ever been to, and doesn't exactly support the author's claimed status as 'wino woman'.

She goes on to ask: '*Will your wedding be outside? Will it be during the day? People tend to drink more white wine in these situations. Or will your wedding be at night? Will you be serving steak at dinner? If so, more red wine will be downed.*'

So far, so good, but despite referring to the wine being downed, she then tells us that only one glass of wine will be consumed per guest per hour, and so 100 guests over four hours will consume 400 glasses, which at 5 glasses per bottle = 80 bottles of wine. She suggests 40 of each colour, before signing off '*Cheers, Wino Woman.*' One glass an hour? I ask you. And yet my Googling was extensive, and I'm sorry to have to tell you, that that is not an untypical estimate.

Thankfully, things were not so in biblical times. We are told that the six stone water jars in our gospel each held twenty or thirty gallons. On my reckoning, that works out at between 545 and 818 litres, or between 726 and 1,090 75 cl bottles. And remember, the guests have already drunk the original wine by this point! Now on Wino Woman's terms we are either talking about over a thousand guests, or more likely we are talking about hospitality on a biblical scale.

Some scholars have suggested that in eastern weddings of the time people were expected to bring their own wine, like modern student parties, and that perhaps the wine ran out because Jesus and his disciples, being poor, turned up without bringing any. This line of thinking goes on to suggest that when Mary tells Jesus that they have run out of wine, that is her way of telling him He's had enough, and it's time to go home!

That may be ingenious, but I don't think it helps us to understand what's going on here. We might also think that Mary is asking Jesus to perform a miracle. And yet, we are told that this is the *first* of his miracles, and so how would she know that he can perform them? No, I think what Mary's question to Jesus tells us is that already there is something clearly special about his presence which reverses the normal roles of parent and child: *she* naturally turns to *him* with the imminent disaster that would be a dry wedding. At the start of the passage Mary is the centre of attention, if not referred to by name: '*There was a wedding in Cana of Galilee and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.*' And yet something shifts during this story, with this first miracle.

The deeper point in performing the miracle is therefore nothing to do with this particular wedding, but with the glorification of Jesus, by revealing his identity. And in providing gallons and gallons of fine wine, overflowing in generosity, he is identified with the overflowing bounty of God. He does not simply provide what is needed, what is asked for, but gives more, *vastly* more; and in ways that could not previously have been imagined.

There's probably a reason that it's wine, because God giving himself to us, giving the life even of his Son, is what we celebrate in the Eucharist, with wine. It is also what we know in the very gift of

life. In the gift of a child; in the gift of our faith; in the gift of the most basic things we need to live: in the gift of water, as well as wine. We might go on to say, in the many gifts of the spirit, as we heard in St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. When we notice a gift we might have, something that we've done well, we might be tempted to be proud. But all that we receive is a gift from God, given as the wine is given, poured out, at Cana.

Like most of us I suspect, I always start the week with a huge list of things to do. If I manage to do most of it I feel terribly pleased with myself; and if I do not manage what I have set out to do I get frustrated. And yet, without fail, the very times at which I feel most blessed - which are therefore the greatest gifts from God - are those which take me away from those tasks. I might see someone who wants a conversation. I have that sense that it is to be a long conversation, and which will therefore take me away from the afternoon's allotted task, and therefore try to avoid it. And yet without fail, that is the day's greatest gift; and the gift is often in my being given the privilege to hear someone's most personal story. And it is the very opposite of human achievement; it is simply receiving, being open, listening, to another, to God.

I know people living in awful pain who treat each day as a gift. That's not to ignore the pain. It *is* real. Life is painful. But also to realise what great gifts we receive from God in the midst of it. Similarly our faith is given to us, something we celebrated in our baptisms last week.

Do you give thanks for your faith? It is again easy to think that we have made the decision to believe, and that that is a case of assenting to a whole host of things about our faith which are difficult to believe: again, another achievement of ours, somehow twisting logic, willingly suspending our disbelief. And yet we know that faith is not like that. Yes, we have to make a decision of sorts, to be open to God; or rather make that decision again and again. But it is also a matter of slow, gradual growth in God; a deepening of our life in God; and a greater awareness of God in our life. And that growth is not a matter of mental assent, but of gift; of blessing. That is something we *receive*, and in doing so we learn to live thankfully.

When I was studying in Rome as part of my training, I was at the church of San Crisogono one morning. Being the kind of person I am I had a planned itinerary for the morning, clutching my guidebook: I had to see San Crisogono; the frescoes in a convent nearby; and another church, and I was up against it. San Crisogono was closing at 11.30, the convent would not be admitting any more visitors after 12.30, and the last church was closing at 1. And it was already 11. So I did not have time for a conversation with the homeless man who stopped me. But such hypocrisy on my way into a church would have been too much, and so of course I stopped.

We fell into conversation, and I told him what I was doing in Rome. He turned out to have been born in the same year as me. He asked me to return to Rome to bless him once I am a priest. And he told me that when he prays he does not pray for money, but to be able to love more, to have more love in his heart.

Now you may think me naive, but that conversation, as with the one this week here, turned out to be the greatest blessing of the day, and I hadn't been open to it as I tried to enter the church. Yet that is how God works. When we least expect it, and are perhaps even most closed to it, He *surprises* us with his love, and so blesses us. And that is precisely what those overflowing jars of excellent wine are. That is what the font at the West end of our church, particularly when full of water, is. They are signs of God's all generous, all-giving blessing of us, his gift of life to us, if we will only be open to it; only accept it; and *when* we notice it, even seize it with both hands and dance for joy in the very presence of God.

Amen