

**Date: Sunday 20/1/2019**

**Epiphany 3**

**Occasion: Eucharist**

**Readings: Isaiah 62.1 – 5; 1 Corinthians 12.1 – 11; John 2.1 – 11**

## **Gift and promise**

A number of things about weddings, and marriage as an institution, have changed over the years I have been ordained. For one thing the Church of England doesn't conduct as many of them as they used to. But within that broad social trend, the way we conduct weddings has changed, and I for one think that most of those changes have been good and worthwhile – and I look forward to further reflections and possible changes in the future.

The key elements of the service remain pretty consistent with past practice, though a number of emphases have changed. In the 1662 BCP service marriage was undertaken primarily for the procreation of children; then it was for the avoidance of sin, that those as have not the gift of constancy may indulge their fleshly desires and still have a chance of getting to heaven; and finally it was for mutual society, help and comfort. In other words, marriage was about rising above our primal instincts – lest we be like brute beasts that have no understanding – while producing heirs. And yes, we should love one another as well.

In the more recent marriage service that we use, the focus shifts to the relationship of love between the husband and wife. The physical expression of that love is presented in a much more positive light and where children and family life as seen as a joy in itself and an opportunity to honour God. And in this context, there have been real efforts to present marriage as a partnership, rather than earlier understandings, that the bride is a gift from one man to another as is the case in the BCP. So in CW there is no giving away, and no vow of obedience by the bride.

Both versions of marriage service, however, share one vital thing: the explicit understanding that we should honour marriage because Jesus did so by his presence at the wedding in Cana of Galilee.

So what was going on at this wedding? We don't actually know much about the wedding, except that Jesus was there, perhaps as a member of the extended family of the bride or groom – we don't know. What we do know is that the wine ran out, that Blessed Mary asked her son to intervene, that he did so to the tune of about 180 gallons and that the steward of the festival was puzzled by a break with the usual – and sensible – practice of saving the cheap wine until the guests were drunk.

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We also know that John uses this story as an opportunity to make some very important points.

The story is about the relationship between the New Covenant and the Old. That's why the best wine comes at the end, when the Christ inaugurates God's new dispensation.

The story is about a promise that we will experience the difference between wine and water. Water is good, a basic requirement of human life – but by the gift of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, John tells us that not only our needs, but our deepest hopes for joy and hope will be fulfilled. The psalmist tells us that God gives us wine to cheer our hearts; John knows this and now so do we.

The story is about the fact that while weddings are about individuals, they are also about families, communities – the intricate webs of responsibility, obligation and affection that support us, as the marriage service tells us, as we just, well, know. It is about God working to meet our needs and hopes within the fabric of our lives as individuals, who are always one element in a web of relationships that help to bestow a sense of meaning and purpose.

The story is about us – or rather, about ourselves as people who flourish when our relationships are healthy, when our relationship with God in Christ is acknowledged and nurtured by prayer, worship and a commitment to discipleship. When this occurs, St Paul tells us, then gifts flourish and everyone benefits. It's worth remembering that for much of his 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the Corinthian Church he is advising, admonishing, telling off. He is trying to encourage healthy relationships, so that the community may flourish. An indication of this flourishing is that everyone recognises the part they have to play in the life of the Church – and Paul outlines what some of these gifts might be. Though it is important to remember this list is not exhaustive or definitive. It is also important to remember that in the next chapter of the letter, he goes on to commend the greatest gift of all, the gift that completes any and every relationship – the gift of love. Specifically, the love that God offers us in Jesus the Christ.

It is our story. We are people of the New Covenant of saving love, expressed in the way we come to worship, the way we pray, the way we deepen our faith through study of the bible and by our friendship with one another in his name; by the way we express our desire to be transformed – as individuals and as a community.

Let us pray that our story will be a story of the gift of love and the promise of hope, shared and celebrated, now and always. Amen .