



LAVENHAM CHURCH

A BEACON OF HOPE

Sermon for Sunday 21 January 2024 – The Third Sunday of Epiphany

Revd Canon Simon Pitcher, Rector

Genesis 14.17-20, Psalm 128, Revelation 19.6-10, John 2.1-11

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

We can all of us share in the excitement of being invited to a wedding. It's an opportunity to dress up in our best clothes and to have a new hairdo. And we look forward to seeing family and friends, don't we? Maybe we haven't seen them for a very long time. And we can share in the sense of joy and excitement that exists between the bride and groom. It's an opportunity for feasting and dancing and celebration and for all the good things in life. When there's a wedding in church, people always look with excitement for the arrival of the bride and welcome her with smiles and with tears of joy sometimes.

So all that being so, we can appreciate why the Bible uses weddings as an imagery for the coming of the Lord among his people. The season of Epiphany is about Christ Jesus, who was born among us at Christmas, but lived among us. And the second reading we heard today from Revelation helps us to imagine a big crowd like all the guests at a wedding reception welcoming the arrival of the Lord.

And it's not a disco that we can hear, but it's the crowd rejoicing and praising at the arrival of the groom, the Lamb of God in their midst. Alleluia. The marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. The bride in this case is the Church, the people of God, those who welcome the Lamb and who receive him. It's like a marriage, because in love, the two will be sealed together as one, one Lord among his faithful people, the Lamb who claims his people as his own forever. So why, therefore, would we not rejoice and welcome him with the same pleasure and joy and delight as those who are guests at a wedding?

Psalm 128 that we heard from this morning introduces us to what a loving, faithful relationship can be like, and the psalmist uses a family to illustrate his point. The wife like a fruitful vine, the children like olives. The husband who by his care has nurtured this fruit and enjoys it as he sits at table with his family. And this is what the relationship between God's people and the Lord is like; unity, fruitfulness, faithfulness, togetherness.

We have a wedding here on Tuesday. The gospel from St John that we heard this morning is the bible reading that we're going to have at the wedding on Tuesday. And the bride, Ina, is a refugee from Ukraine. She came to Lavenham when her home was taken from her by the Russian invasion. Her son is still fighting there on the front line. And here she works in the care sector, caring for the elderly in our community. She's gradually rebuilding her life. And Roger, whom she's marrying, is a local man, and they met at a bus stop in Lavenham and got to know each other on a bus trip to Sudbury to go to Tesco's. So who said romance was dead, eh?

And from this background, they're going to be married here on Tuesday. It's a wonderful story, I think, of how God can take the water, the ordinariness of life, and turn it into the very best of wine. So St John tells us that there was a wedding on the third day at Cana in Galilee. The third day reminds us that Jesus rose

from the dead on the third day and entered into the newness of resurrection life. So this story that we've heard this morning is about life and joy and newness.

Galilee is the place where Jesus lived a human life. And the village of Cana was an obscure, ordinary village in an obscure, ordinary part of the world. It could be anywhere, it could be everywhere. If we went to Cana today, it's still a fairly unspectacular place, but you can go and see the location where the miracle is supposed to have happened. But really, it could be everywhere, it could be anywhere. And here Jesus and his mother and his friends are invited to a wedding.

As in our own culture, so then, weddings were an occasion for joy and for celebration. But in the time of Jesus, the wedding would be a whole village affair. In a small place where neighbours didn't really move very far and where whole generations grew up side by side, everybody knew everybody else, so if there was a wedding, you had to invite the whole village; and you had to invite the wider family of both the bride and the groom as well, all his village too. So it became a big affair.

People couldn't get there by car or on the bus, they had to travel on foot, so they were going to come for some time - you couldn't just invite a few people to the evening buffet, you had to invite them to stay for the whole week. So the bride's father was expected to put on a good party for a good length of time, not just for the wedding day, but for however long great aunt Bessie and all the cousins were going to be staying around for.

So to run out of wine was a matter of shame. It would indicate a lack of hospitality and care for your guests. It might indicate that you couldn't really quite afford this wedding and that would be very embarrassing. Nobody would want their daughter's wedding to be remembered as the occasion when everybody went home hungry and thirsty. A very poor do to talk about for years to come.

So when the wine runs out at this wedding celebration, it's a symbol of human limitation. We cannot achieve the fullness of life on our own. We cannot provide the joy of heaven or recreate the glory of God on our own. Without God, something is missing. And the empty wine jars and the potential thirst of the guests at this wedding are a symbol of spiritual dryness; death, disappointment, emptiness, wilderness.

And that's quite deliberate from St John, I think. In the book of Numbers, in the Old Testament, in chapter 20, there's a very important story. So Moses was leading the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promised land, and they're passing through the wilderness, and it's dry, and they're thirsty. And they come to a place called Meribah. And here the people quarrel with Moses. And they complain that God has rescued them from Egypt, only to let them die of thirst in the wilderness. And Moses prays to God, and God tells Moses to strike the rock with his staff; and water pours out, and miraculously, all the people are saved from their thirst. And the story ends by saying that the glory of God was revealed in the wilderness by this miracle.

And today, the Israelite people, the Jewish people, remember this story. It's one of their most important stories - the place of Meribah, where we complained about God; we didn't trust God when the going got tough and life was hard. Moses and Aaron are told at the end of the story, that even though they did what God had told them to do, they didn't really believe God; so they're not going to enter into the promised land. But God has saved his people with the gift of water.

Now, at the wedding in Cana, in the New Testament, in the time of Jesus, this story is renewed and enhanced by the ministry of Jesus, God with us, God living in the midst of us. Six stone water jars are filled with water; many gallons of water. And I guess that those stone water jars containing water are meant to remind us of the rock at Meribah, where God refreshed his people with water. But instead of water coming out, the chief steward draws out the very best quality of wine. Gallons and gallons of the very best quality of wine.

This is deliberately meant to be the new wine of the kingdom, that Jesus comes to bring on earth as it is in heaven. New life, refreshment, joy; the presence of God living among his people. Later, in the gospel of John, Jesus says, drink this wine in remembrance of me. Abide in me, he says, because I am the true vine. Those who drink of him shall never be thirsty, he says. Jesus is offering new wine; new life; life restored; the fullness of life; risen life that is God's gift to his people. The fullness of life, when we live our life in relationship with God. When the spiritual emptiness bit is filled.

And the wedding is the unbreakable union between God and his people, nurtured and sustained by the love of Christ. And there's so much wine at this reception, there's no chance of it running out. We can imagine the awe and the wonder, the joy and the delight, as all the guests danced and laughed and rejoiced together. Jesus graciously blesses his friends with new life, saves them from the embarrassment and humiliation, blesses them with the promise of all that lies ahead in their married life together. We can imagine Jesus laughing and rejoicing in his love for everybody there.

The scripture writer Gerard Hughes raises the question 'Can you imagine Jesus dancing? Can you imagine Jesus at the wedding reception, drinking and laughing and dancing with his friends?' I'll leave that to you to imagine for yourselves. But I think it's a wonderful image that he might be doing that at this wedding reception. And the story ends like this. Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him. So it's the opposite of the story of Meribah. Where Moses did not believe in God and missed out. The disciples do believe, so they will not miss out. They will journey on with Jesus.

So for us, I think, the story encourages us to see that when we come together, we are members together of the party that rejoiced with Jesus at the wedding at Cana in Galilee. We are invited to be guests at that wedding. We're not abandoned in the wilderness at Meribah. We have a faithful God in whom we can trust, who blesses us with the fullness of life. We have nothing to complain about.

The bread and the wine that we share in this service are symbols that remind us that Jesus, spiritually, is here, present with us, that he nurtures us, refreshes us, and walks with us. Wherever we go, he will be with us. The wine will not run out. It will pour over in abundance, generous abundance. That we might know the love of God, the quality of the love and the life that we share together.

Make that reality known, as we support, offer, and love each other in his name. So we're all invited. We're all included. We are all of this invited to dance with our Lord. The joy of the fullness of life.

In Jesus' name. Amen.