

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 24th January 2021 – Epiphany 3

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

It is clear from all the gospels that Jesus loved a party. So many pictures of Jesus portray him being rather solemn, as befits the man for whom love of the human race meant the Cross. Who, frankly, would not be solemn about that prospect! Then there is all his stern criticism of many religious enthusiasts of his time, like the Pharisees, and his regular frustration with his disciples for their lack of understanding of his mission, and also his constant challenging of human selfishness. It all sounds really quite stern and solemn and serious.

And on top of all this, we think of the responsibility that comes from realising that you share something vital and fundamental with the person of God. That seems pretty solemn and serious too! And when it comes to many styles of worship, solemn and serious is often where it's at even if it is often also mixed with deep joy and great hope. It seems that many human beings rather expect a great religious leader to be solemn and serious. Perhaps this is really our agenda, because the meaning of life is obviously so important, and faith is an important part of the serious side of life. Some people of course are even ready to die for their faith.

Clearly Jesus could do solemn and serious, in buckets, but there is whole other side to Jesus that is also clearly evidenced by the Gospels. Jesus loved parties. He was great company. Many of his parables involve parties and get-togethers. His vision of heaven is of a huge party. For Jesus, people being together, enjoying each other's company, looking out for one another, united across all sorts of human divisions, (that's there really important bit for Jesus,) sitting light to personal identities, being a new humanity..... This is what life is really meant to be about for Jesus. For Jesus, heaven is a huge great party.

And so in St John's gospel, the first great sign of Jesus takes place at a wedding banquet. In what can seem to be the most serious and profound of the gospels, St John makes a vital point with this first sign in his message about Jesus. Despite all the forthcoming solemnity and seriousness, here is a man for whom parties are important.

Moreover this first sign is completely over the top. More than 150 gallons of water is turned into excellent wine, when people have probably drunk quite enough already. For goodness sake, one water container would surely have been enough! But no, Jesus had to do all six. This is hardly the action of man who only does seriousness. The huge quantity of wine of course has other significance, about the overflowing of God's generosity and grace, and how there is enough grace for everyone.

We live in serious times. Our social interaction is being seriously and necessarily curtailed. The social side of our worship is being seriously and sadly curtailed. Anxiety levels are high, and many of our normal ways of dealing with anxiety, with the simple reassurance of human company, are currently denied us. I don't think it is flippant to say that Jesus really does feel our pain in this respect at this time. Of course we need to keep the rules, for everyone's sake, but it's not what most of us really wants, including Jesus.

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There is so much in today's world that seems to be driving people apart. Social media seems to allow people to live in almost parallel universes, sharing so little in common understanding of the world around them; and with self-identities becoming so much more important to people rather than their common humanity. The lack of real social interaction across boundaries is perhaps becoming, not just sad and hard, but a serious problem in many ways.

In this context Jesus' vision of a new humanity becomes all the more important; drinking the new wine of the Kingdom of God, in joy and justice and unity. This is not about isolated social get-togethers on social media with like-minded people. It is about celebrating a new way of being human, with all the old divisions cast away, and humanity rescued from its bondage to sin and decay. This is one of the things that this Holy Communion service celebrates. It's why Jesus gave it to his Church. It is a kind of party where Jesus is the host.

What is the real meaning of life, according to Jesus? It's like being at a great party where everyone is included, and everyone is united. And the wine is good! Amen.

CJ. 24.01.21