

Water into Wine

16th January 2022

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Second Sunday of Epiphany 2022.

Readings: [Isaiah 62.1-5](#), [1 Corinthians 12.1-11](#), [John 2.1-11](#)

I grew up in a wine-growing region, and so I know a little bit about vineyards and wine-making. One of my holiday jobs as student was in a vineyard, and there's nothing more impressive than seeing a pneumatic wine press in action, or to see the huge stainless steel tanks in which the freshly pressed wine-must rests before being decanted into smaller oak or steel barrels. When we moved to Australia, we made friends with a number of local wine-makers, and every year for the past four I have taken part in treading grapes in preparation for a boutique vintage of which we then get a few bottles a year or so later. The process of turning grapes into wine is labour intensive, needs much care, and needs time. And even then the end-result might not always be as excellent a drop as hoped for. Every year is different, every vineyard is different and so every vintage is different.

This morning's lessons invite us to hone our palates for the best wine of them all. They encourage us to reject second best, and instead to strive to share the wine of the Kingdom. They tell us that at the Marriage Feast of the Lamb there is plenty for all to enjoy. And they exhort us to share the gifts of goodness we have received with others, so that all may have a part of God's bounty. They invite us to pledge ourselves anew to God and to use his gifts of spiritual blessing, so that we may be a community of gifts, people who do what God does—share with others out of the abundance that we ourselves have received.

In our gospel reading from John's story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we meet Jesus and his followers at the very beginning of their journey together. Jesus had just called his disciples, promising them that 'they would see greater things than these'—namely heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. Now they, and Jesus and his mother, were guests at a wedding in Cana in Galilee. But this wedding is not just a private family celebration among friends. Rather, it is an event with cosmic significance. Because here, 'in Cana of Galilee', Jesus 'revealed his glory and his disciples believed in him', John assures us (John 2.11).

The story of Jesus reluctantly following his mother's request to help the groom's family when the wine at the wedding feast ran out is one of the best-known miracle stories in the Bible. The story is depicted in one of the stained glass windows re-telling the life of Jesus on the lectern side of our Cathedral. Jesus stands at the head of the table, with his mother and the evangelist St John at his side. The steward of the feast stands at the foot of the table, with the bride and groom seated. The flagons of wine on the table are empty. The groom is looking on with concern. And the steward and the bride hand him a cup of wine each. Wine that had been poured out of the large jars underneath the wedding table. And the steward is obviously just about to tell the groom how strange it is that he has kept the best wine till now.

Our window captures the end of the story, the result of the miracle. Six large vessels filled with wine. The gospel tells us that, in spite of his misgivings that his hour—the time of his revelation to the world—had not yet come, Jesus did what his mother had asked him to do. He went and asked the steward to fill the large stone vessels kept for the rites of purification with water. Each vessel held about 120 litres of water, the evangelist tells us. And when the steward tastes some of the liquid from the vessels, the water had become the finest wine. Jesus supplies abundantly more than is needed for the wedding feast. 800 litres of wine now filled the jars.

And Jesus gives more than wine. The sign of the water turned into wine shows how vessels once used for washing away impurities and sin were now filled with the wine of the Kingdom. Although his 'hour' had not yet come, this, his first sign in Cana of Galilee, already points to the time of fulfilment, when Jesus will purify the whole world, tread the wine-press and pouring out his own lifeblood like wine. At the time when he is lifted up high on a cross for all to see. 'This is my blood shed for the forgiveness of sins', he will say at another table as he prepares to drain the cup of suffering.

Our first lesson, from the prophecy of Isaiah, takes us to another wine-press. The prophet speaks to the exiled people of God. Jerusalem lies in ruins. The harvest of the land, the wine of the hillsides, now feeds alien occupiers. And the prophet speaks about how God will deliver his people, and vindicate his chosen. A chapter after our lesson, Isaiah describes how God's deliverer is already close at hand. Robed in crimson he marches in great might crushing God's enemies. God's deliverer is not dressed in royal robes, we learn. His robes are stained red because he has 'trodden the wine-press alone'. 'I trod the nations in my anger, and trampled them in my wrath. Their juice spattered on my garments, and stained all my robes', God's deliverer tells (Isa. 63.3). The wine of God's wrath running like scarlet across the mountains of Jerusalem cleanses the land from sin and unites it once more to God.

As Jerusalem is set free from its occupiers, the harvest of the land is made holy, the prophet tells. 'I will not again give your grain as food for your enemies, and your foreigners shall not drink the wine for which you have laboured'. Rather, 'those who gather it shall drink it in my holy courts' (Isa. 62.9). As Jerusalem is purified from the stains of occupation, the nation is sanctified once more, the worship of God restored in a solemn pledge that Isaiah describes as a marriage: 'As a bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you', the prophet foretells the actions of the coming Messiah, who will set free God's people from sin, so that they in turn may be united to God in a pledge as solemn as a marriage vow (Isa 62.5).

It is these promises that the disciples would have recalled as Jesus poured out litres and litres of the finest wine. That God would purify his people by himself treading the wine-press. That God would come close to his people in the way in which the newly married groom at their table rejoiced over his bride. That God would give of the harvest of the land abundantly for the people to share in his holy courts. 'Jesus revealed his glory and his disciples believed in him', John tells us (John 2.11).

The jars of water kept for ritual purification now were full of the wine of the Kingdom, a sign of God's cleansing presence among his people. And having pre-figured the universal cleansing of the world at the time his hour is being fulfilled on the cross in this act of divine generosity, Jesus moves on to Jerusalem where, we read in the verses immediately following our gospel reading, he will drive out all those who make God's holy courts a place of desolation, cleansing the Temple from sacrilege, and promising to raise up a new Temple where worship would be offered in spirit and in truth.

Here, at the outset of John's story, the disciples and the mother of Jesus have just come together. They have been told to expect 'greater things', and witness his first sign (John 1.51). His mother already knows Jesus to be who he truly is—the Christ, the Messiah. The angel of annunciation had told her so before her miraculous birth. The host of heaven had proclaimed him so at the time he was laid in a manger. But Jesus' other followers have yet to piece together the signs and learn his full identity. It is only when the mother of Jesus and the disciples come together again, at the end of the gospel, that they truly know him for who he is: the One who trod the wine press of God's wrath that would break his own body, and stain crimson the foot of the cross like the finest wine, as God's people were redeemed and set free to become a family—pledged in solemn union to one another as in a marriage. Set free to become a universal body, shaped by the gifts that each contributes to build up the Messianic Kingdom.

As he breathes his last, as his hour is come and is being fulfilled, Jesus sends forth his Spirit and fills the earth with gifts. As his blood is poured out on the cross, the Spirit of God's love is being poured into our hearts for the forgiveness of sins. As his body is broken, the Spirit of truth brings judgement

on the powers of evil and the rulers of the world. As he entrusts his mother to his friend from the height of the cross, we are given the Spirit of adoption as God's own.

In our epistle from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, our patron speaks of what it means to be gifted the Spirit that was poured out at Jesus' last breath on the cross: 'to each of us is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good', for the building up of one another (1 Cor 12.5). These gifts are given us to become a community of gifts, people who share their God-given spiritual gifts with one another so that Christ's body may be shown forth in the world, so that his glory may be revealed and the people may believe in him.

Having grown up among wine-makers, I know the labour that goes into making 800 litres of the finest wine. Jesus gifts abundantly more than any of us can imagine or conceive. We may never, by our own labours, attain the perfection and the abundance of his own gift. But we can give ourselves in his service as a thank offering of what has been so generously given us.

Epiphany-time, the season of the church's year we mark now, is a time of revelation and a time of gifts. In these weeks, I would encourage you to reflect on your own gifts that you have received and hone them. Hone them like you would your palate if you were to taste each aroma, each exquisite flavour of the finest wine. If your gift is speaking words wisdom, share your wisdom. If your gift is speaking knowledgeably and truthfully, speak out. If your gift is sharing faith, tell of your confidence. If your gift is praying for healing, pray—we need it now more than ever! If your gift is praying for miracles, or discerning God's words to us—pray and discern.

Hone your gifts so that we may become a community of gifts in which the signs of the kingdom may be shown forth abundantly. And give thanks for the giver of this gift—Jesus Christ—who has made known to us God's goodness and glory so that the world may believe.

Lord Jesus Christ,
in you the Father makes us and all things new:
Transform the poverty of our nature
by the riches of your grace,
let us taste the wine of the kingdom,
and fill us with your gifts so that
in the renewal of our lives
we may become a community of gifts
that makes known your heavenly glory.
Amen.