

**Buxton Methodist Church**  
**17 January 2010**  
**Epiphany 2, Education Sunday,**  
**Beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**

Texts:

Isaiah 62.1-5

Psalm 36.5-10

1 Cor. 12.1-11

John 2.1-11

'How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life,' says the Psalmist. What can that mean for us today, especially when our global community is faced with what the UN has called one of the worst humanitarian crises in its history.

On Thursday morning I caught snippets of John Humphrys' interview with the Archbishop of York regarding the tragedy in Haiti. As you might expect, Humphrys was framing his questions in the age-old terms of the problem of evil: 'How could a loving God allow something like this to happen.' I'm afraid, amidst crusts of toast, wellies and the rush to get all of us out of the door in time, all I was able to catch was the sense that this was a typical exchange between people talking past each other because their respective terms for approaching the issue were so divergent.

On Friday I caught a bit more of 'Thought for the Day' in which Giles Fraser, Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral, referred to Leibniz's 'best possible world' approach to the problem of evil. The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 in which 30-40 thousand people were killed happened shortly after the publication of this argument, and in the aftermath Voltaire's *Candide* was written in response to Leibniz, pointing out the absurdity of his argument and saying that any attempt to defend God in the face of suffering was a moral disgrace and a sick joke. Fraser went on to say that he didn't have an answer for what has happened in Haiti and could quite understand that such a tragedy will cause many to doubt the existence of God and to think that those of us who do believe are living a dream. 'Yet I still believe,' Fraser said. 'There exists a place in me, deeper than my rational self that compels me to respond to tragedies like Haiti...with prayer.'

It is not un-Christian to question and doubt in the face of tragedy, but for Christians such a response usually takes the form of crying out to God. In other words it is paradoxically done in the context of faith. Why? Well, as the passage from Corinthians says today, 'No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.' That is one way of saying that it is not by argument that we are moved to faith or belief in God. So it is unlikely that we will be moved by argument *not* to believe. That doesn't make dealing with human tragedy any easier. In fact, it may make it more difficult, for those who do not believe in God don't have the same desire or need to understand God in the face of it.

By the Holy Spirit we have proclaimed that 'Jesus is Lord'. And today, in the face of tragedy, we proclaim by the Spirit that 'Jesus is Lord.' Ironically, we find ourselves in the midst of a passage that speaks of joy and abundance. Could it have something particular to say to us today?

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In her reflection on the wedding feast passage, Kate Huey says: 'However much we appreciate hospitality today, the people of Jesus' time and culture practiced it as a survival skill, a way of

looking after one another in a hostile and perilous environment, and an assurance of being looked after in turn.<sup>1</sup> Jesus responds to the need at hand, ‘showing [...] earthy compassion for the hosts who are in a terrible predicament [...]’

The University of Derby is known for offering a safe, friendly and supportive environment. It is said that these are characteristics that set us apart from other places of further and higher education. And those characteristics well describe what chaplaincy seeks to offer. As chaplains, we have a vision for the University of Derby Chaplaincy and one that is particularly fitting to reflect on as we begin this year’s week of prayer for Christian Unity. The vision includes this statement: ‘Our chaplaincy is united, and yet diverse in its make up. Any Christian vision of Chaplaincy should reflect this unity and diversity, seeking to include everyone and everything in the life and love of God the Holy Trinity.’ I like this statement, particularly the last phrase, because it not only says something about those of us who make up the chaplaincy team, it also says something about the nature of our ministry – it includes everyone and everything. Hospitality, the central focus of today’s Gospel passage, encapsulates a lot of what we do in chaplaincy.

This past summer I attended a Vocations Day led by the Bishop of Derby. His reflections for the day were based on the wedding feast passage and there is one phrase that has stuck in my mind – perhaps because I grew up in a teetotal environment – he said: ‘Truth is when the wine flows.’ In light of the fact that we are celebrating Education Sunday on this second Sunday of Epiphany, I was reminded of this poignant phrase.

As I reflected this week on the account of the wedding feast at Cana, four things struck me about the nature of the hospitality offered, four things which seem to elucidate the kind of truth to which the Bishop was referring. The hospitality offered at the wedding in Cana is driven by the other. It is gratuitous. It is somewhat hidden. And it is transforming.

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We see something of Jesus’ humanness in his initial reaction to the lack of wine. ‘Why is that my problem? It’s not my time,’ he says to his mother. And we see something of typical motherhood in Mary’s response – ‘Get off your backside, son, and be useful.’

During Epiphany, we celebrate our participation in what God is doing in his creation. ‘An epiphany is an event which breaks through all the things you think you “know” and the things you don’t know. It is a revelation. It is a blast of light that reveals the basic truth and meaning of our lives.’ (From Terry’s Epiphany I sermon). Jesus’ baptism – the event we celebrated last week – was an epiphany. It was, like our baptism, an occasion of God’s blessing. Jesus was blessed by God. He was anointed for ministry by the same Spirit spoken of in today’s passage from Corinthians, the Spirit who gifts us or blesses us with the joy of participating in doing something for the common good.

Epiphanies usually carry an element of surprise. There is something of the unexpected about them. The nature of an epiphany is that it comes to us, it is not created by us. And at this ordinary occasion of a wedding feast, Jesus finds himself swept into a moment of God revealing his glory. The ‘hour’ is, indeed, not *his*. It is the bride and bridegroom’s. What he does is not driven by his own need, but the need of another. And so it is the way with spiritual gifts. When we are anointed by the Spirit - and all of us, as Christians, are – we are anointed for the sake

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<sup>1</sup> From ‘Extravagant Sign’ weblink:

<http://i.ucc.org/StretchYourMind/OpeningtheBible/WeeklySeeds/tabid/81/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/319/Extravagant-Sign-Jan-11-17.aspx>

of the common good. *Truth is when the wine flows. In the face of human tragedy, then, the question of Truth is a question wrapped up and answered in serving the other.*

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That the wine had run out was probably more to do with the guests than the hosts. I suspect it was quite a party. I think it's pretty safe to say that by this point they were all in need of designated drivers! And Jesus turns the water into wine...and not just any wine, but the special reserve label kind of wine. Why? As the chief steward intimates, they'd be too drunk to notice! Whatever the answer to that question, it speaks to me of the utter gratuitousness of the love of God. It's over the top. It makes no calculations as to means and ends or cause and effect. It's a love that includes everyone and *everything*. It's a love that, as the Psalmist says, touches humans and *animals* alike. The rain not only falls on the just and the unjust, it also falls on the field where no one is about. God's love is a gratuitous love. *Truth is when the wine flows. In the face of human tragedy, the question of Truth is a question wrapped up and answered in a hospitality characterized by gratuitous love.*

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Epiphany is about the glory of God being *revealed*, so to characterize the hospitality offered at Cana as 'somewhat hidden' is perhaps paradoxical. During Epiphany we celebrate the glory of God being revealed to the Gentiles. Generally we speak about those outside the chosen community of faith seeing God in the face of Jesus. But I wonder if we could look at it from another angle. What does such revelation say about those 'within' the community of faith? Or about the very term, 'within'? Epiphany – this event that breaks through the things we think we 'know' – is also a wake up call to all who think they are on the 'inside' that actually, under the fountain of God's gratuitous love, there is no 'inside'.

We are given a glimpse of this truth in the wedding feast. Those who are blessed that day are those who don't actually realize they've been blessed, those who are encompassed unknowingly in the provision of the abundant wine. It is only Jesus' immediate circle of friends and the servants who know a miracle has taken place. Not even the chief steward realizes – he thinks the host has, indeed, saved the best wine for last. And the guests just keep on partying. Most importantly, then, in the immediate context of this story, it is the host who saves face. *Truth is when the wine flows. In the face of human tragedy, the question of Truth is a question wrapped up and answered in God's glory that is always for **our** sake, not **his** sake.*

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Lastly, the wedding feast at Cana reveals a hospitality that is transforming. The jars that Jesus uses are, as the passage tells us, jars of purification. These jars have already been used, but in Jesus' act they are re-purposed and transformed. Today we celebrate, among other things, Education Sunday. One of the things I asked the children to think about was a teacher who had made a significant impact on them. When I was reflecting on the hidden way Jesus went about this miracle at Cana, performing it in the background, as it were, I was reminded of my friend, Sue, who grew up in a home where she was neglected and abused by her parents. I remember saying to her that sometimes I didn't know how much difference I made in my role as chaplain, and she responded with this story. She said: 'I remember having a teacher...who...on one occasion sent me home during the day to ask my mother for money for a trip (the school was just across the road). I was filled with dread at this request being fully aware of what my mother's response would be but nonetheless had to do as I was told. My mother battered me and sent me back to school (without any money). I had to wait for about 45 minutes before I could enter the classroom as I couldn't speak due to crying etc. The teacher showed little

compassion when I told her what had happened and when I look back she had put me at great risk.'

Thankfully, that wasn't the end of Sue's story. She went on to say, 'Two years later I had a great teacher called Mrs Thomas at top class in primary school who was very sensitive to my social situation and was very good at intervening in the most 'hidden' way in order to protect me from fellow classroom children who could be very cruel. She had a daughter the same age as me and used to bring her clothes and shoes for me as hand-me-downs. She also made some clothing items for me on her sewing machine. When there were school trips planned that required payment from parents she would automatically know that I would be unable to attend due to family income etc so she would call me up to her desk for payment (as she did with the rest of the class individually) and pretend to take some money off me. She was always very sensitive to the need of preserving my dignity amongst my peer group. She attended my confirmation service in the school linked Church of England and bought me my first ever bible which I still have. She would often hold me back at the end of the day stating that she needed me to help her with a task then when all the children were gone she would give me food (biscuits/fruit etc). A great teacher who was concerned with the 'whole person' and showed me compassion and kindness in such a way that reminded me that I was valuable and worth something. It made a great difference to me having a teacher who viewed me through the eyes of Christ.'

Sue is the product of transforming hospitality. Today she is a loving mother of two grown boys and married to a minister and hospital chaplain. She herself is a social worker helping people in need. In is often the story isn't it – people who have been blessed and transformed by the love of God shown by others become themselves agents of transformation. Isaiah's prophecy, fulfilled in Christ and through those who serve in his kingdom, touches people like Sue: 'You shall no more be called Forsaken...but you shall be called My Delight is in Her.' What a difference our teachers can make. Talk about teaching Truth. *Truth is when the wine flows. In the face of human tragedy, Truth is wrapped up and answered in a transforming hospitality.*

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In our prayer of confession this morning, we said, 'When we hoard what you have given us, we cannot be a blessing to other people. Forgive us...so we might be restored to life...strengthen us to share our gifts with others.' Today, as we think of those who educate us, as we think of the Spirit who gifts us to serve the common good, as we consider what truth is in the midst of great tragedy, let us drink deeply from the story of Cana, and taste and share this new wine of the kingdom.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.