

## **SERMON FOR EPIPHANY 2**

**Like me I suspect you have kept more than an eye on the tragic events in Haiti and on the worst earthquake there for 200 years. Given that Haiti was badly affected by Hurricane Katrina just three years ago, has a very weak government and the lowest per capita income in the western hemisphere, there is much to worry about. So poor is the infrastructure that the one strip airport is completely log jammed, and 4000 prisoners were able to walk out of jail when their prison was torn apart in the quake. Film of the devastation is filled with the screams of crying children and exhausted relief workers. By yesterday lunchtime £12million had been raised in the UK by the Disasters Emergency Committee and I hope we can add to that after Mass today. All the money collected in the blue bucket at the back of Church will go straight to the appeal.**

**And in the middle of all that chaos and despair, our Gospel today is the familiar story of Jesus at a wedding - and the second of the Epiphany signs when he turns huge quantities of water, stored in purification jars, into first class wine.**

**Is there a connection? Really?**

**At the PCC meeting on Tuesday we had two major debates. This was the PCC at its best as it addressed major policy items which affect us all and affect the future of St James'. I haven't time to go into huge details here but our first discussion was about the content of our website which, we have discovered, is used more and more by people getting a feel of what we are about, before they venture through our doors. That makes its style and content absolutely crucial. I am happy to say that we are setting up a working party shortly to look at each and every page of the site – and have been welcoming comments from right around the congregation about how they find it now. We would be really grateful if you could spend some time at home looking at the website – not just as a core member of St James' but also with the eyes of an 'outsider looking in', What would they make of what we have posted there? What does it say about us as a community; are things clear, are the pictures an adequate reflection of what we are about, and so on? Could we enhance the website it in any way and if so, how?**

**We then moved on to think through our policy of enabling our young people to receive Holy Communion. Like most catholic**

parishes the policy here has been to prepare children for Confirmation really quite young – rising eight in some cases.

Of course the Church of England has been involved in a massive debate about this over the last twenty years and that has brought about a reconsideration of what the sacrament of Confirmation is all about; is it just the gateway to taking Communion or something else?

Again these are huge issues and ones that can't be sorted in one meeting. So we are also setting up a small working party to discern what are the strengths and weaknesses of either system; confirmation early or having a split celebration, admission to First Holy Communion followed by Confirmation into adult membership of the Church at a later date. These are all very exciting discussions to be having at this time.

Not least because they take us straight to our second reading this morning from the 1<sup>st</sup> letter of St Paul to the Corinthians – which is such a fascinating piece of writing that I am going to suggest we read it together during Lent – but more of that next week.

The reason why St Paul's letters to the Church in Corinth are so helpful is because they enable us to think out some key issues within our faith today. So for example when Paul writes in the second paragraph: *Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone* what is he driving at?

In this great paean of rejoicing over the multi-faceted Corinthian Church, Paul is simply pointing to the wonderful way in which the Spirit of God works in each person “according to their gifts, their age, social background and disposition.” Everyone receives the Spirit because that is the way that God works: giving without counting the cost. But not everyone will be able to use everything that they receive – at least not yet.

It may well take time for God's gifts to take effect, but that does not mean to say we have to wait until some future moment before the Holy Spirit can be released into people's lives. God works on the 'slow-release' principle – like some divine kind of Alan Titchmarsh

with his all-purpose fertilisers! At first you can't see anything happening - and then, all of a sudden, the fruit begins to grow and to bloom, and you know that all that early season feeding has done its job.

And that is how the sacraments work for us in the Church today. As in the parable of the sower, the farmer is pretty indiscriminate about where he sows the seed: some on rock, some on scorched earth, some among the brambles – but some will surely fall on the good earth where it can grow wonderfully and strongly. And flashing back to Paul, these seeds will be nourished by different farmers (sometimes Apollos, sometimes Paul himself), none of which matters terribly much because it is God himself who alone has the power to make things flourish.

But it is that almost cavalier attitude which Paul is pressing on the Corinthian Church: *look how wonderful God is working - so that some of you are wise, some of you are good teachers, some of you are great at offering hospitality, some of you are able to console and heal...*

And Paul would have been the first to sit them - and of course us - down in our seats and say, that is exactly what Jesus' first miracle was all about.

Aha, you thought I forgotten about that? Not at all! For the essence of the miracle at Cana, which we rehearse at every single wedding ceremony here in Church, is about the extraordinarily lavish way God gives us his gifts.

It was tough that they had run out of wine: tough and embarrassing. And into that black hole of *whatever can we do next?* is the inspiration to ask Jesus for his help.

But the way St John writes up the story is not that easy and we have to try to pick our way through all the pictures and allusions – how, even though the punters at the wedding did not know it, it was the Son of God who was sitting at their table; that what Jesus was showing was how God had wedded himself to his people through the action of the Christ who is the new bridegroom. It is the story of the

prophet Hosea and his strumpet wife Gomer, but in an even deeper form.

Of course the idea of Jesus the bridegroom is not unfamiliar to us. Remember the parable of the bridegroom who comes home late at night and finds only half the welcoming party present because the foolish virgins have run out of oil? Be prepared he says. But Jesus is also associating himself with the wine itself. Through St John's carefully constructed phrases Jesus is saying that, unknown to the steward, *he is the new wine which has been kept back from the people until now.*

And there is more, for wine is not just the drink of weddings, *the fruit of the vine, the work of our hands*, as we say at each Mass; wine is also the image of Christ's sacrifice, the blood of Calvary. And course it was superior wine for its aroma is the scent of the redeemer, the one who came to die in order to bring life in all its abundance. And so we could go on and on...

But not without coming back to basics: this story is, first and foremost, about the generosity of God, the way he gives his love to us without restraint, oblivious to whether he is being recognised or thanked. This first sign is like the last - at Calvary - *a gift for the sins of the whole world.* And that could take us into another area, about why this story is so appropriate for weddings – not because Jesus was present at one but because marriage (and indeed all loving relationships) are also about giving without expecting any reward in return.

Which leads us back to Haiti and to our response to the tragedy which is unfolding there: what will we do about it? Can we find in ourselves the ability to see how generous God has been in giving us his Spirit - and to give serious money in this good cause? If so, today's Alleluia verse will have come alive for us: *Alleluia, alleluia Your words are spirit, Lord, and they are life. You have the message of eternal life. For Haiti: may it be so.*