

2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
Rev Dr Katherine Meyer, Christ Church, Sandymount, Dublin
Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
(Isaiah 62:1-5 / John 2:1-12)
20.01.2019

The opening of the story is big, bold and unsubtle, a large and complicit wink at those who are listening. And for just a moment we are like eager children, clambering around the storyteller in our pyjamas, saying: *Read it again! Read it again!*

And of course, staying in our pyjama roles for a moment, we're not insisting that someone tell us the gospel story again because we don't know how it ends. We *know* how it ends. And yet, still, we want to hear the story again, precisely because we *do* know the ending. We just need to hear it again.

So it's important to remember that when John the evangelist tells the gospel story, he's telling it – and he knows he's telling it – to people who already know it, and who know how it ends. He's telling it in his own way, of course, with his own additions and in his own context. But still, the gospel story is a story his listeners know. And that's where the large and complicit wink comes in, as he begins to tell *this* story.

Third day, John begins, *on the third day*. Well, where has this congregation heard that before, in a version of the gospel story – Matthew, Mark, Luke – we already know? Or *wedding banquet*, John says. *There was a wedding banquet*. When, in the story we already know, is a wedding just a wedding? Doesn't it always – and here's another exaggerated wink, of course – doesn't it always point to the banquet of the Messiah?

So they get it, the people for whom John is writing, the people who are about to hear the gospel story as *he* tells it, the people like us, who will hear it read and preached. We already know the story, and we already know the ending. And maybe that's why John tells the story of the wedding feast at Cana in the way that he does. He knows he can count on us.

Because at first glance, there are so many things about *this* story that seem not quite right, a bit off, really. We hear early on that the wine has run out, but we don't know whether the host has badly misjudged what would be needed; or whether it was just very late, and the guests had been more than well provided for, and really, it was time to go home. We don't know either why Jesus' mother decides to alert him to the situation, or what, if anything, she expects him to do. When Jesus replies that his hour has not yet come, he too seems to be saying that the timing is off here, not quite right. And yet he doesn't, for that reason, refuse to get involved.

And then there are the water jars, which the servants dutifully fill, according to Jesus' instructions, 25 – 30 gallons each. If they were empty to start with, that could have taken some time. Then: *Take some of it away with you*, Jesus says to them when they are finally finished, *and give it to the chief steward*. And then without waiting Jesus slips off, back to the guests he had excused himself from some time earlier.

Minutes later, the steward tastes what John here calls *the water – that had become wine*, almost as an afterthought; as if to say, *Oh, sorry, I almost forgot to say, but of course no one knew, except the servants, of course*.

And there the story peters out, but not before ending on the most jarring note of all – though notice that John is winking at us yet again. *Everyone*, the steward says to the *bridegroom* whom he has anxiously summoned, *everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.*

Which in the context does not sound like a compliment. At the very least, the steward is not impressed with the bridegroom's judgement; at worst, he is annoyed; he, after all, is likely to be blamed. And this, John concludes, was the first of Jesus' signs, which revealed his glory.

So where, we might ask, are we? Here we have the evangelist re-telling a story to believers who already know its outline and many of its details by heart. And he wants his hearers to remember that we do know the story already, even if the burdens and sorrows of life often distract us for a time.

And so because he wants us to remember, John gives us hints everywhere, exaggerated winks, reminders that we know more than we think we do: the third day, the wedding banquet, the hour that has not yet come, the wine, the bridegroom, the hospitality. Yet we still end up with a story that is somehow not quite right.

To be sure, there is this sudden moment of surprising abundance at its heart, water jars which even when they are finally emptied again will be forever stained red with wine. But in other ways, the story is so obviously incomplete, so hard to read. If there is a miracle here, somehow it almost feels as if we missed it, as did everyone else in the story except for the servants, who did the hard work of filling the jars with water in the first place.

And certainly if there is glory here, if God is made visible here, it's a strange sort of glory, in which Jesus ducks away as soon as he can; and the bridegroom has no answer to give to the suggestion that he has just stupidly provided the best wine for those who are already tired and drunk.

And yet oddly this incompleteness is not so difficult, because we get that. We get a world in which incomplete lives, most especially our own, are bravely or stupidly lived on a daily basis. We get a world in which it sometimes seems that most people are either drunk or tired or worse. And John knows that those for whom he writes, who already know the story by heart and yet need to hear it again and again – they/we get it too.

Because decades, centuries even, after the *third day* of which the other gospels speak with such sober joy, this incompleteness is the shape of believers' lives in the world. Daily the evidence seems to pile up that little has changed, and many things have gotten worse; and yet we know that everything has changed. In so many ways, for the believer, life just goes on as before, and the water jars have to be re-filled, and water remains water. And yet sometimes we can actually *taste*, as we taste the best wine, hints of a life that has been utterly transformed.

And so at the heart of this story, whether heard by 1st or 21st century believers, is the crazy affirmation that even when the water jars are filled with water which remains water, we live in a world in which the power of resurrection seeps through the cracks and spills through, and stains the jars red. It is in this same world that Jesus lived among us, and his hour came. And the good wine was not held back, but poured out; and the jars are still stained red, and we will drink it again in the reign of God.

The writer Nadeem Aslam begins his novel, *The Golden Legend*, with these words: *The world*, he writes, *is the last thing God will ever tell us*. And the world we know mostly consists of water jars, not banquets. Water which is poured out for the washing of hands, and the washing of children. Water which is poured out for the daily centring of religious practice and ritual; and for the daily de-centring of hospitality and the interruptions of other people. Water which is stored in jars, the stuff of human responsibility, and the sign of our need to be mindful of tomorrow.

But in God's telling, water which, just when we are looking elsewhere, becomes wine. The story we know, the one we want to hear again and again and whose ending we know by heart, is one in which we are now, like the servants, complicit. We live in a world indelibly stained by resurrection.

The opening of the story John tells us today is big, bold and unsubtle, a large and complicit wink at all of us who are listening. For now, the story ends as dawn breaks, and the servants sweep up the last of the party from the stone terraces, and the guests return home, and rise and go to work. But for all who are still listening, the story moves relentlessly toward the end we know, whose coming we can almost taste, like wine.

And to God alone be the glory.