

“Transformation & Surprise!”

January 22nd : Some notes on a sermon
at Kirby Grindalythe & Helperthorpe

Today's gospel reading comes from the second chapter of John and tells us the story of a wedding banquet. It sounds like a big event with lots of local people invited including Mary, the mother of Jesus and also Jesus with his disciples. The first question that struck me as I read this story: why was Jesus invited? He was not doing the ceremony and he was not preaching and of course they did not know the wine was going to run out later! The reason Jesus was invited was because they knew him and wanted him to be there on their special day.

However, as the celebrations continue something has gone terribly wrong with the planning... perhaps too many people came; or they were more thirsty than anticipated; or they simply did not order enough drink... whatever the reason, they run out of wine, a disaster for the wedding! In the midst of this disaster Jesus calmly orders the servants to go and fill six huge stone water jars with water. Once they have done this he tells them to fill their wine jugs and to make sure that the person in charge gets the first drink. When he has the first drink he declares it is the best wine he's tasted all day. What an incredible transformation, water into wine. This is the first miracle that John records in his gospel.

Christians often make the mistake of thinking that this is what prayer is: We are in the middle of some disaster or other and if we invite Jesus into the middle of it and, if we can just summon up enough faith, then a miracle will happen and we will emerge smiling and rejoicing in this amazing God! Of course when this does not happen, we blame ourselves for not having enough faith to believe God could do it or we blame God and think he has abandoned us.

This story IS a really good illustration of what prayer is like, it is just that we need to read the whole story to understand prayer rather than just pick the bits we want. Two things we often miss out of our understanding of prayer are both also found in this story if we look a bit harder:

1. In this story Jesus was invited to the wedding but it was not because there was a disaster for him to fix and neither was it because they wanted some religious ceremony. Instead they invited Jesus to the wedding because they knew him. Through our prayers we can invite Jesus into our everyday life, the celebrations, the ordinary and the sad.
2. If we just focus on the transformation we miss something very important and that is the element of surprise! What is surprising in this story? Read through John chapter 2 verses 1-11 and see how many things you are surprised by. Once you have done that, here are some of the things that surprised me in this story:

- Jesus does not want to do a miracle, he feels it is the wrong time
- His mother, Mary and Jesus have an argument about it because she thinks he should do something about it.
- Jesus loses the argument because Mary overrules him and tells the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them.
- Everybody has already drunk the place dry, do they really need more wine? Why not turn water into strong coffee! Or better still, for your first miracle why not heal someone of a terrible illness?
- Does Jesus really need to make so much, 138 gallons of wine seems to be way over the top.
- We learn that this is the best wine of all, but why bother because, as the Steward points out, people wait until they are all drunk and then bring out the poor quality wine.

We should be warned by this plethora of surprises that if we invite Jesus in to our lives, in to our joys and our disasters, then we must expect many surprises mixed in with those transformations. When my daughter was nearly three she became seriously ill. Of course, as we were Christians we prayed and many other people in churches up and down the country also prayed for her. She did not get better, in fact she got worse... However, the surprises came thick and fast: As a whole family we changed, I was different at work, a colleague told me that I was so much more approachable than I was before! And things did change in my daughter too, most notably the huge doses of steroids had no lasting side effects. When she finally grew out of the condition in her teenage years we saw many ways in which transformations had happened, it was just most of them were surprises!

What do you think? How do you find prayer? Does this raise more questions? Do you agree or disagree? I would love to hear your comments on any of these sermons.... Just type your comments or questions in the comment box and I will try and give a reply too!