

Epiphany 2

John 2: 1 – 11

All this week we have watched helplessly as the injured died in the streets and collapsed buildings of Haiti. The television news still shows stacked bodies, left corrupting in the sun for days, and it shows casualties in grisly detail, and they were only the victims we were allowed to see.

Again and again we heard people begging for water. You can live for some time without food but, without water for three days, your body begins to shut down. Death rapidly follows, especially for children.

The remoteness and contrast with today's Gospel may make decent people squirm. In Cana of Galilee there is water aplenty; six stone jars each holding twenty to thirty gallons of water, and Jesus turns it into wine at a wedding. This was the first of his signs. The other Gospels speak of miracles: John's Gospel speaks of signs. Signs of what? How a sermon interprets this first sign says quite a bit about how we see God and ourselves as Christians.

How many times have you heard this Gospel reading of the turning of water into wine? And how many sermons have you heard on this?

There are several real classics, aren't there?

One classic sermon, familiar in boarding school chapels, treats the miracle as being about facts you must believe. Jesus turns water, H_2O , into wine, a very complex solution of ethanol, various esters and lots of other organic chemicals. Gee whiz. This miracle is a biochemistry lesson. C.S. Lewis said that, in Nature, water was turned into wine all the time in grapes, but that Jesus did it once, instantly. This just proves that Lewis knew no chemistry, nor any science at all,

a fact he freely admitted. If we focus on chemical reactions inside Cabernet grapes, or the historical truth of an unique event at one wedding thousands of years ago, we have turned wine into water. In this classic sermon, at least we don't have to look at Christians dying in Haiti. The sign points to Jesus manipulating atoms and molecules, and does what? Prove that he is the Son of God? No, that really was not what the sign pointed to.

Another classic sermon makes this a moral fable. We have just listened to John's Gospel, and heard nothing whatsoever about whose wedding this was. That doesn't stop Christian moralists from filling the vacuum with lessons to be learned about character.

Surely, this must have been a very morally-upright couple for Jesus (and his mother) to have graciously blessed their wedding with their presence? That means all the other weddings which Jesus (and his mother) might have attended, but chose not to, must be cursed. Presence of Jesus equals blessing for good folk, absence of Jesus equals curse for naughty people.

In this twisting of Christianity, if a good thing happens, God is blessing you. If a bad thing happens, an earthquake of 7 on the Richter scale, for instance, it must be because God is cursing you because of a legend that 200 years ago, slaves seeking freedom made a pact with the devil. That was in the time of Napoleon III, or whatever. I know that Pat Robertson's spin doctors are busy claiming he didn't say that but thanks to the wonderful world of YouTube, you can watch him say it again and again. He even got his Napoleon wrong but what is a mere factual error from this Oracle of God? God is all about rewards and punishments: the miracle at Cana in Galilee was a reward for righteous living, or whatever. Do pastors really make sermons like this? You bet they do! Should they? That is a question for them to answer though we may have our opinions!

The sign of the turning of water into wine is a sign, John tells us. A sign of what and to whom?

The classic sermon you and I have heard most, and probably like best, is that Jesus turns the mere water of life into joy-giving wine, not just 2 Buck Chuck but a Chateau-bottled Premier Grand Cru claret of the best vintage year. This is what having Christ in your life is like: happy, happy, happy. Not that this interpretation is altogether wrong, it just draws on an assumption. Doesn't it assume that we are among the cheerful wedding guests, like Jesus, (and his mother)? That's the role we are mostly in socially: we go to weddings and enjoy the reception afterwards. And this morning as people die of thirst not too far from the Mimosa-sipping Bahamas, is mere water really so trivial? To endlessly happy and inebriated wedding guests perhaps it is.

But hold on just a minute. Who says we are to identify with the tipsy guests? In this Gospel reading, as you may have noticed, there are some people present who are neither the bride nor the bridegroom, nor guests, nor the steward of the feast. Nor Jesus' mother nagging him and getting a distinctly frosty response, (though I note that, in the end, he does do what he's told.) No, the people I mean don't say anything. But when Jesus turns the water into wine, it is written that "the servants who had drawn the water knew."

The servants. The servants provided the water needed for purification, the lustration rites. They provided the water Jesus transforms. They alone knew what Jesus did while everyone else was making loud wine snob comments, "I'm getting a taste of vanilla and blackberries and, yes, just a hint of oak..."

Point is, in the Gospels, we Christians, - the followers of Jesus, - are often referred to as servants, douloi. Christians are the servants of the people of God and Jesus sets us the example. The characters in this sign, the ones who make it

happen, are us, unsung heroes, anonymous, faceless, servants.

Read John 2: 1 -11 again, paying attention to the servants. Without the quiet and unobtrusive carrying out of their duty, there would have been no water, and therefore no wine for others to enjoy. If we are the servants, it is because we know what Jesus will do, and seek only to make his holy work possible. That is our privilege.

In the streets of Haiti, five days after the earthquake, people are dying of thirst as well as from infection and trauma of crushed bodies and limbs. Life-giving water is on its way, being distributed with some difficulty. The spectacular medical interventions in makeshift hospitals, the photogenic rescuers pulling those last few survivors from the rubble, the powerful C-130s and helicopters, these are what catch the eye of the news cameras. We are right to celebrate these heroic efforts.

But look quietly, be still enough to see the face of Christ reflected in the cup of water which keeps a child alive. In that we see the work of the anonymous servants of God. Our work. Our duty: not to learn facts, not to pass spurious judgment, not to think to be Christian is always to wear a fixed glassy smile. As servants we are called to look through the eyes of Christ at the needs and suffering of others and do our part to help him in his humble and loving service however we can.