

Water into Wine

(St Salvator's Chapel, St Andrews University, 15 January 1995)

John 2:1-11

Epiphany, which many of you will have celebrated in worship last Sunday, traditionally describes the revelation of Christ to the wise men in Bethlehem. But of course the meaning of that event lies in the fact that it prefigures, in the story of Jesus' infancy, the later revelation of Christ to the world as its Lord and Saviour. So the lectionary we follow very appropriately takes us on from the first epiphany to the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the revelation of his glory through the miracles, beginning with the first of them.

The miracle Jesus performed at the wedding feast at Cana was the first of his miracles. John makes a great point of telling us that: 'Jesus did this, the beginning of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.' John calls Jesus' miracles signs, because he doesn't see them as mere supernatural feats, but as *significant* acts, acts which draw attention to Jesus because they are remarkable events, but at the same time acts which, for those who have eyes to see their real meaning, highlight the significance of Jesus and his mission from God. They reveal his glory, as John says: who he really is and what therefore he has come to do. So the first of the signs, the very first thing Jesus does as he embarks on his ministry, ought to be rather revealing.

Instead, I suppose most of us find it rather puzzling. If you find difficulty believing that the Gospel miracles happened, then you will probably find this miracle one of the most difficult. On that problem, I'll just say, for the moment, that I think the world is far too mysterious a place - in spite of all our scientific knowledge, reality is still far too mysterious for anyone to be able to say dogmatically what can or cannot happen. More positively, I think that the world as God's creation is not a closed reality, sealed off from its Creator; it's open to the influence and activity of God within it. And sometimes God surprises us. Just when we think we've got the world sorted out, we know what to expect of God, God does something surprising. And that's the point of a miracle. You know some people say: Of course, in theory God could do miracles if he chose to, but why should he choose to? If God designed the regular course of nature, surely he'll stick with that, not interrupt it? To which as good an answer as any is: God wants to surprise us. A miracle makes us sit up and take notice; it surprises us into recognizing something about God's purposes we might not otherwise have expected.

But what, exactly? The miracle at Cana is a surprise even to readers familiar with the Gospel stories of Jesus' other miracles. In one basic sense perhaps it conforms to the general pattern of the Gospel miracles: Jesus meets a human need with miraculous divine provision. But the need in this case is just that the hosts at a party have run out of wine. Compared with the needs of the desperately sick or seriously disabled people Jesus usually healed, more wine for a party seems more like a luxury than a need. We can make the need seem a bit more serious if we remember the social situation: to entertain relatives and neighbours at a wedding was a major social obligation. To run out of wine would be a serious social disgrace. But this is evidently not a really poor family. Couldn't they have just sent out to buy more

wine? In the end, we have to admit that Jesus isn't so much meeting a need as being rather extravagant. As Jesus' contribution to the party, if you like, he provides far more wine than they could possibly have drunk, even though such wedding celebrations traditionally went on for a whole week. And much better wine than they would normally have expected to be drinking. Luxury and extravagance are the words we have to use.

But then after all why not? I've been rereading Dostoevsky's great novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. It has a chapter called *Cana of Galilee*, which Dostoevsky himself said was the most important chapter in the novel. It's also, as a matter of fact, one of the best commentaries on our Gospel story. It's the chapter in which Alyosha, who had been intending to become a monk, has an experience in which he enters into his true vocation. His beloved teacher, the holy Father Zosima, has died. Zosima had told him that after his death Alyosha was not to stay in the monastery but to go out into the world and to live like Christ among the people. Up to this point Alyosha has been sad about this. But now he embraces his new vocation joyfully. And the experience begins as he listens to a reading of the story of the wedding at Cana. 'Oh, that miracle,' he says, as he recognizes what the reading is, 'that sweet miracle! It was not people's grief, it was their joy that Christ was sharing when he performed that miracle; he was helping to share their joy... Whoever loves the people, loves their joy too.' Alyosha loves the Christ who enters into the simple joys of ordinary people. But the beauty of Dostoevsky's chapter is how this straightforward reading of the text leads on to a deeper level of meaning without a break. The marriage feast is also the great heavenly banquet at which the new wine of salvation makes all the guests merry. But this doesn't mean leaving aside the literal meaning and substituting a symbolic meaning: Dostoevsky ties the two closely together. Alyosha sees that it is by becoming, in his love for us, one of us and joining in our merrymaking that God invites us all to the eternal merrymaking at his heavenly marriage feast. The significance of the sign is much greater than the sign, but it shares the same quality.

So we can say (why not?) that Jesus enjoyed the party, Jesus shared the joy of the couple and their family and friends, Jesus wanted them all to have a good time. The miracle must mean more than that - we wouldn't really need a *miracle* story to tell us that - but it only means *more than that* because it first of all means *at least that*.

Let's think then about the further meaning: what the sign signifies. Why do people have wine at parties? I'm not asking: why do people drink alcohol? - there are lots of other answers to that. But why do people provide wine at social gatherings? When it has the intended effect, wine gives everything just that little bit more vitality, people enjoy everything a little more, it enhances the experience of life. So if one wants to imagine life enlivened, enhanced, lifted to a new level, given a new quality, lived with a new joy and intensity and awareness and openness to God and to people and to creation - wine is a good image. That's why the prophets so often imagined abundance of wine as a feature of the messianic age to come: 'the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it' (we heard from the prophet Amos in our OT reading). In the messianic age people will not only have the necessities of life in guaranteed supply. Not only will their needs be met. There will also be in abundance that luxury which enlivens and enhances life.

This is why the miracle of the wine at Cana is the first of Jesus' miracles. It declares: the messianic age has come. Jesus is introducing into the ordinary life of people like

those at the wedding feast that messianic enhancement of life that the prophets predicted. The luxury of the miracle - the extravagant abundance of remarkably good wine - is the whole point. This is God's extravagantly generous provision for human salvation. Jesus enacts in the miracle what, later in John's Gospel, he says: 'I am come that they might have life, and have it abundantly.' Not mere life, life in its minimal sense, but abundant life, life in its maximal sense. Life enlivened, enhanced, intensified, invigorated is the salvation Jesus brings. Of course, it is also life healed, redeemed, restored. Salvation is putting wrongs right, healing hurts, restoring what is lost. But it is more than that: salvation also makes what is already good so much better. certainly Jesus shared our griefs in order to assuage them; he felt our pains in order to heal them; he bore our sins in order to deliver us from them. But he also shared our joys in order to enhance them. He shared our life in order to raise it to the n-th degree of alive-ness.

I think we need to recover this sense of salvation not only as healing (immensely important as that is) but also as the enlivening, the enhancement of life. But we need to understand it rightly. I do not mean that people who are living rather privileged lives, as most of us are, simply do even better out of life. This is not some kind of prosperity gospel. One of the things that enhanced life, the life Jesus gives, means is that we live life with greater awareness of other lives, in greater openness to all life. The life Jesus gives is the life Jesus lived, painfully open to the needs and the hurts of others, as well as also joyously open to the joys of others. To live life more fully is to love all life, to care for all living beings against all threats to life: against poverty, sickness, enmity, death. To live life more fully even means being able to take on these threats, to suffer them, even to accept death, as Jesus did. Fullness of life is the resource from which we can live for others, and give ourselves for others.

I hope it's also clear that by talking about life enlivened I do not mean qualities like that kind of bubbly, lively happiness that some people have or that kind of enviable vitality we find in some people. It's good that there are people like that, but it's mostly a matter of personality. People are not worse Christians for having different personality traits. I'm talking about something much more fundamental. Essentially it is life lived out of the source of life, which is God. All life comes from God. All life is God's gift. But new life, enlivened life, eternal life, salvation - whatever we call it - is life reconnected, permanently connected, intimately connected with the divine source from which it therefore springs up continually. This is life with meaning, depth, intensity, sensitivity, fertility - not simply in itself but in that it lives continuously out of God. It is life enlivened with the life of God.

So the little miracle - water turned into wine - points to the big miracle - life resourced from its divine source. The little miracle, I said, is possible because God's creation is not closed off from its Creator; it's open to God's influence and activity within it. Even more, the big miracle - salvation - means that God's creation is not closed off from its Creator; its life can be reconnected with its divine source, it can begin to live out of God; it can begin to become the new creation when there will be no more death because all creation will be alive with God's life.

Soren Kierkegaard, the great 19th-century Danish philosopher, said: 'Christ turned water into wine, but the church has succeeded in doing something even more difficult: it has turned wine into water.' What Kierkegaard said of the church, I think we might say also of secular society. Without God, life becomes not more but less

alive. Very often it becomes a trivialized life. Finding no depth or meaning in life, people have to be content with living on the surface of life, living for the moment, living for oneself alone, frantically trying constantly to enliven the surface with novelty and excitement. Finding no depth or meaning in life, people lose the passionate love of life that goes out to others in sympathy and caring. Without God, people lose touch with the springs of life from which its vitality is sustained and replenished. In these kinds of ways life can be reduced and diminished, and nowadays it often is. But, even so, as long as life remains life it has the qualities of life: its vitality, its joys, its living sympathy with others, its love of life. These good things of life are all around us. And Jesus, the guest at the marriage feast, does not reject these qualities of everyday, ordinary life; he shares them; he appreciates them; he enhances them; he gives them new vitality. And so even those who've been quite happy with the ordinary wine they've enjoyed up till now, find the wine they taste last much better than they could ever have expected.