

**Sermon preached by The Rev'd Dr John Deane
at St James', King Street, Sydney**

**Second Sunday after Epiphany
16 January 2022**

Some of you may be aware that the Anglican Church in Australia has very little sense of a national identity or an appropriate infrastructure for such a purpose. Forged out of our colonial past and fueled by theological suspicion as to our orthodoxy and Anglicanness, the diocese remains the primary focus of our operation.

While we may have knowledge of our own parish and perhaps other local parishes and even the diocese where we are located, there is often very little understanding of what goes on in other places beyond our own boundaries. In this context arguably the General Synod Office and the Anglican Board of Mission are the only existing mechanisms which have the potential to provide insight into what is happening broadly across the Church and more importantly about how we might collaborate.

Now this may not unduly trouble many of us, but the problems in dealing with the Anglican Church over abuse issues and redress claims – and I hasten to add we were sadly not the only denomination struggling in this way – were a matter of considerable concern for the external adjudicators. And if this were not enough to cause us to reflect seriously on the way we conduct ourselves, it also can be seen to hinder and limit our ability to witness to the gospel in our own place.

For the last two years we have struggled to come to terms with COVID-19 and more importantly to provide real leadership beyond the local level. Silence or worst still conflicting messages about vaccines and masks, about the rights of the individual for personal freedom as set alongside the rights of communities to feel safe and protected have marked our response and reflect our capacity.

Yet COVID-19 has been our constant context and its impact on the church has been enormous. Although the Anglican Church had been downsizing for a number of years, there is no doubt that the pandemic has given a greater impetus to the process. For the last eighteen months I have taken on some responsibility for the mail still received in the ABM office and have been dismayed at the number of worship centres and parishes which have become return to sender because they have closed or been amalgamated. This is undeniably very sad with ramifications not only for the church but also local communities more broadly and I would argue even our whole society.

COVID-19 has challenged all our securities and presented us with many risks. In response we yearn for and hold on to what we once regarded as normal. The church,

institutional and familiar, falls within that category. No longer enjoying a high level of authority and status nor functioning as a major part of the glue, which knits society together, we, who are the fabric of the church, are faced with the prospect of further change – something which many of us find difficult to consider or commit to.

Yet, while there may be a sense of loss, some grief and even despair among us, the ebb and flow of the church is an historical reality, and our trust must always be in the God who makes all things new. As our gospel reading for today reveals, there is hope and a future, which Jesus calls us into.

One biblical commentator made the point that this narrative was an amazing treasure trove of theological riches to which another colleague responded that it was also a temptation for any preacher to go off on lengthy tangents. I shall take that as a timely reminder to remain focused.

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee and the mother and disciples of Jesus along with other members of his family had been invited to attend. At a point in the banquet the almost unthinkable occurred and the wine ran out. This inadequate provision of wine ran against the basic rules of hospitality and was not easily remedied. It was inviting social disgrace in respect of the family, which would reverberate negatively into its future and onto its subsequent generations.

At a wedding party, sharing the best quality wine was one of the ways of expressing hospitality. Wine was considered a symbol of joy and a sign of abundance, and the lack of wine on an auspicious occasion implied ‘no joy’ and poverty. The mother of Jesus, who seems well aware of the situation and what it represents, highlights the problem to her son: “they have no more wine”.

Jesus’ initial response to his mother and the situation appears to be indifference perhaps even dismissive. “Woman, what has this to do with me?”; and he goes on to add the curious comment: My hour has not yet come. Nevertheless, his mother persists in her confidence that he can and will respond and instructs the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them.

Now you may not have recognised in the opening verse of this story four critical words – on the third day. This is the language of the resurrection and also of Moses time with God on Mt Sinai. This may not be the time for Jesus in respect of his humanity – that is still to come – but in respect of his divinity, it is the time. Once more we are reminded that God's time is not always our time!

Just as all seems lost, the confidence of the mother of Jesus is justified and he steps in to remedy the situation. The attention to detail at this point is significant. Six stone jars which have been used previously as part of the Jewish purification rites are filled with

water which without any further explanation become the highest quality wine.

While at face value this account may seem to be the story of a somewhat exceptional village wedding. There are signs in the text that more is at stake. Underlying this miracle is an understanding that God has created a divine people with a divine purpose and that God remains eternally faithful towards that people and their purpose. While the Law, symbolised by these water jars, has proved imperfect through human failure, God nevertheless still acts to ensure perfection and the eternal future of God's people.

With the coming of Jesus, the old has been transcended by the new. The water turned into wine points to the radical, renewing of creation which is being brought into being through Jesus. The miraculous nature of Jesus' sign is exemplified through the utterance of the master of the banquet "you have kept the good wine until now".

This miracle is an act of pure grace, and it demonstrates not only God's enduring faithfulness but also power to bestow life and abundance. Of course, abundant life does not mean a life of ease, comfort, and luxury or an absence of sorrow and suffering. But it does mean that in Jesus we encounter a grace which is able to sustain us even amid sorrow and struggle.

Abundant life means that in Christ we are joined to the source of true life, life that is rich and full and eternal, life that neither sorrow, nor suffering, nor death itself can destroy. In the Book of Revelation and other parts of Scripture the symbol of the wedding banquet with its joy and abundance becomes the paramount symbol of salvation and the end-time.

Moreover, in the symbol of the Woman, the mother of Jesus, who is never named in the text, we find the connection to ourselves. The new Eve is giving birth to the community of the end time, a people worthy of God, represented in this scene by this gathered community at Cana.

At this banquet which anticipates eternity we also continue to find our place at the table not only through the Eucharists we share but also in the everyday meals of our existence wherein we live out our relationships and faith and together find joy, hope and purpose. Here, too, God blesses and nurtures us.

As anyone acquainted with John probably appreciates, John writes that we may believe in Christ and, as if that were not enough, believe again in Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh. And as John makes reference to in concluding today's narrative, to believe we need also to perceive the divine glory of Jesus.

Glory is a critical Johannine theme. It is the source of light and the glory of God has the power to illuminate the whole of creation. Glory connects not only to the "signs and

works” of Jesus’ ministry, beginning here at Cana, but also to the beginning, the incarnation and the ending, the cross and resurrection. The events at Cana reveal the divine glory which exists within Jesus and radiates love and life.

I want to leave the final words on this text to Professor Dorothy Lee. In preaching we often speak of the grace God bestowed on us and we summon people to a life of obedience and mercy. These are fine themes. But in the wedding story we come face-to-face with something more: with the beauty of Jesus Christ in his divine humanity. Catching a glimpse of this vision is perhaps more sustaining for us than anything else.

It enables us to transcend ourselves and our immediate concerns with a vision of God’s beauty and radiance which is our final goal. This is the rock on which our lives can be built, holding us in the hard times and reassuring us that the divine glory-made-flesh will have the last word on our lives and, indeed, on our whole creation.