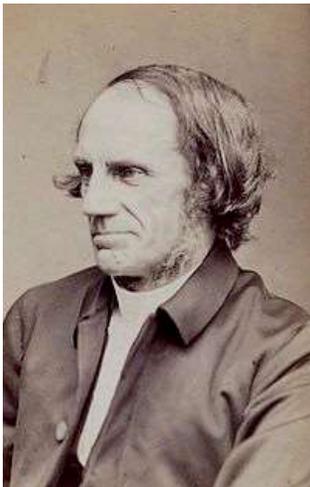


SERMON, EPIPHANY 3, 240121 – GENESIS 14, JOHN 2



Christopher Wordsworth – the composer of our first hymn - was a privileged young man. His uncle was the poet William, his father was Master of Trinity College, Cambridge. One brother was a classical scholar, the other was a bishop. Christopher was a pupil at Winchester, then went to – guess where – Trinity College. The fact that his dad was Master was probably quite useful, but Christopher won the Chancellor’s gold medal for poetry and became a Fellow of Trinity College. 14 years later he went to be Headmaster of Harrow, then became a Canon of Westminster.



In 1869 he became Bishop of Lincoln, a post he held until his death in 1885. He is buried in Lincoln Cathedral. While bishop he encouraged his Cathedral’s Chancellor, Edward White Benson, to start a Theological College in 1874. That College lasted until 1995. There is a Wikipedia page for the College. It has a section entitled “notable alumni”. I was sad that my name isn’t one of those listed, but I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to study there for three years. My generation of clergy were so fortunate to have residential training, in the days when both Church and government thought that a university degree was something that Society knew to be worth investing in – very few clergy these days have the luxury of full time, residential training.

In 1906 they added a chapel to the College building, and in their stained glass window they placed a picture of Melchizedek. I wanted to show you a photo of it, but the College site has now been redeveloped and the chapel is now a posh house. I expect the window survives, but no one could find me a photo. Sad how the treasures of our churches disappear once the buildings close.

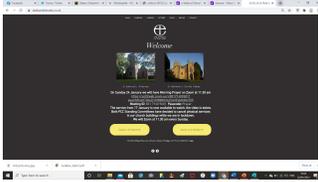


Here is a Melchizedek window from St Andrew's church in Dumfries. It is a very strange little story. We are right back, as near the beginning as we can be – Abram, Abraham, the very beginning of what would eventually become the Jewish nation. War and battle, and in the valley of Shaveh, the King's Valley, which is just outside Jerusalem, Abram, the tribal leader, and various other kings, leaders, meet. King Melchizedek of Salem, Salem being Jerusalem, you can imagine him as the High King. Not just a king, but a priest as well. Jerusalem already a holy centre. It would be fascinating to know more about the religious life at this time – don't think Temple, priests, an organised religion, bible, liturgy – think small tribal groups, extended families, religion for a small group of people, and holy men, shaman.



Melchizedek brought our bread and wine – so Christians automatically make the eucharistic connection. When they built Christ Church in Belper in the 1850s, a church of the High Church eucharistic tradition, they chose Melchizedek for the tiles in front of the altar. He brings the bread and wine, and the priest king gives Abram a blessing: , “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered

your enemies into your hand!” God Most High – more than a tribal god, but God Most High – this is Abram’s God, and always will be. He will be the God of Abram, David, Solomon, and all the other figures of the Old Testament – and Joseph and Mary and Jesus, and Peter and Paul – and on and on and on. Our God, God Most High.



You may have noticed that Abram’s response is to give Melchizedek a tenth of what he has. I can make a joke – “if you wish to make a donation, please press the yellow button the front of the website” – but seriously, giving is our response to the love, the challenge, the blessing of God. Remember the prayer:

Yours, Lord, is the greatness,
 the power, the glory, the splendour,
 and the majesty;
 for everything in heaven
 and on earth is yours.
 All things come from you,
 and of your own do we give you.



Melchizedek gets a mention in Psalm 110 “The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent: 'Thou art a priest for ever after the manner of Melchizedek.’”. In the New Testament book of Hebrews, once again, the link is made between eternal priesthood, Melchizedek, and now Christ, the great High Priest.



There are many lovely pictures of the wedding at Cana in Galilee – this one is in Hungerford parish church. I love this couple – wouldn't it be lovely to know a bit more about them. What were their names? Had they been together long? Were they happily married? How many kids did they have?



I had a quick google of paintings – this one is by the Roman artist Mattia Preti – but on none of the paintings I could see does the chap who actually took the wedding appear. No one bothered to include the priest, the rabbi, the chap who did the work! I wonder if he had gone to the party, and what he felt of Jesus and his disciples being there. What did he think of Jesus? Had he heard of this man beforehand, had his colleague just down the road in Nazareth – they are only four miles apart – spoken to him about this chap who'd stopped being a carpenter because he believe he was called by God? Perhaps he was a bit suspicious, worried, when Jesus and disciples arrived – perhaps Mary was a woman who he had heard about, they still talked about the rumours surrounding that young man – or perhaps the priest who married them was the sort of boring individual who had gone home rather than partying with the newly weds!



It seems a long time since we last did a wedding – this was Matt and Nicole who married at St Matthew's at 4.30 pm on the Wednesday before the November lockdown, having moved their wedding to Wednesday because they wouldn't have been allowed to have it on the Saturday they had booked. They both work in schools, and were back at work the following morning. We have two weddings booked in for April – I wish I knew whether they are going to happen. It was lovely this week to have two phone calls from couples wanting to plan their weddings in our churches in 2022. One chap wanting to get married at St Edmund's, the church where he was christened and where his parents were married. Another couple who live in the parish, and this is their church. It's what we're here for – and I hope we'll remain here to do that long

after I've gone. I'm sad that most weddings don't take place in our churches any more – and it is no good me, or anyone else, wishing we could turn the clock back twenty, fifty years – we can't. We'll work with what we're given, we'll welcome, and we'll encourage, pray and care.



Being a teetotaler, I can't say this miracle does much for me. My mother had signed the pledge, she did not do pubs. When I got to Cambridge I found a girlfriend who realised that a teetotal boyfriend was quite useful – I could make sure she got home. I was never encouraged to change my way of life – and when Gareth was a teenager he couldn't drink alcohol because of all the heart drugs he was on, so the two of us would nurse our J2Os together.



Being bought up in the sort of church where we didn't do alcohol, where we never served alcohol at church functions – indeed the deeds of the chapel said we couldn't – it was always a bit of a problem when this was the gospel story. If alcohol is so bad, and I remember preachers who would tell us all the evil it caused – if alcohol is so bad, then how come our Lord made more of it. “Six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.” That was quite a party. I do wonder if the following morning, twelve disciples all woke with thumping headaches – I wonder if Jesus managed to stay sober. I wonder if the rabbi had a few words to say about the rather riotous party that had taken place after one of his weddings.

Jesus does not always do the miracles we expect. He does not fit the picture we expect, and we must never be surprised when he gives us a different vision, when he takes us out of our comfort zone, challenges our preconceptions. None of us know where the next few months will take us, but we know that God is with us.

Let's finish with verse 2 of Christopher Wordsworth's hymn:

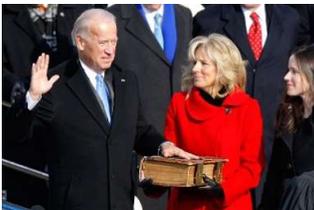
Manifest at Jordan's stream,
 Prophet, Priest and King supreme;
 and at Cana wedding-guest
 in thy Godhead manifest;
 manifest in power divine,
 changing water into wine:
 anthems be to thee addressed,
 God in Man made manifest.

I'm not sure why Mr Wordsworth was awarded the Chancellor's gold medal for poetry – and I do prefer inclusive language. I prefer “humanity” to “mankind”, God made human, not God made Man. Having said that, “God in Man made manifest” is rather special.

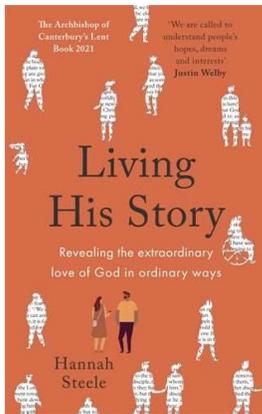
Manifest as a verb – “to make clear or evident to the eye or the understanding; to show plainly”.



We have two challenges – firstly to see God at work in this world. When we're tired and depressed, when lockdown goes on and on, when we're frightened of all that is going on. Well, you don't need me to tell you to believe that God in Man made manifest when you see our NHS at work.



The second challenge, is to help people see that God is at work. That there is a power that is greater than humanity, a force that has existed before the world began, and will continue when it has crumbled into dust. A divinity to whom Presidents bow in prayer – and this time they mean it – a divinity which gives us a purpose, a challenge, and the power to change the world. That power is seen in the ordinary things of life, the bread and the wine, and it is seen in the amazing miracles of life.



Most of all, it is seen in the person of Jesus – we are called to live his story. This is the Archbishop’s Lent Book – I’ve put the details of it on the Noticebook, it would do us good to read it, to work through it. As churches we face huge challenges – people do not naturally turn to us, or to Jesus, for anything in life these days – even in a pandemic. But this is not the first time our churches have faced challenges and, with God’s help, we will continue the work and the ministry to which he has called us.