

SERMON – 16 JANUARY 2022 - 1 Corinthians 12.1-11, John 2.1-11

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



One of my favourite gospels this week, and a chance to reflect on last year's weddings. We had 22 of them across the two churches – which is somewhat more than normal, we were catching up. In 2020 we had eight weddings – two of them at the end of February when Covid was just something we were starting to hear about. The other six were all small, socially-distanced affairs – and there were a lot of tears. Tears as couples tried to work out which 15 people could invite, tears as they set up a zoom link to granny and grandad – or even waved at their parents the other side of the world, unable to travel. Even in 2021 life was not normal. When we married Callum and Natasha at St Matthew's just three weeks ago, granny was not able to be here. June – who was one of our regular congregation for so many years, unable to come to her church for her grandson's wedding because of Covid – if she had left her residential home to come to the service, the rules say she would have had to isolate for several days on her return. Perfectly reasonable rules – we've seen what happens when Covid spreads through a residential home – and rules we are following. Following the rules has meant pain and suffering – at weddings we can usually cope because we are happy, we can share that happiness even on Zoom. The funerals when we were all sat separate in the Crematorium, or stood – socially distanced – around a grave (unable even to enter the House of God because the rules said it had to be closed).



The hours Julie and I spent on the phone trying to keep Hannah going because several of her patients had died that day - I am not going to make a joke about

what has been going on in Number 10, because it is no longer funny. We use the word “evil” for a reason – and I have no doubt that when you treat people the people you are suppose to serve with such contempt, there is no other word that should be used.

OK – just one joke before we move on. A friend tweeted that his wife had asked where the last Kit Kat had gone from the biscuit tin. “You’ll have to wait for the enquiry” he replied.



Let’s move onto happier things. 12 weddings this year across the two churches, though only 4 here – which is a shame. I do think that’s partly linked in to the fact our church is locked so much of the time. What’s odd is that we haven’t got any until May, when we have three in one weekend. The numbers are much smaller than they were and marriage is changing. The average age for a man to marry now is 38, for a woman it is 35. Half of the British population is married, another 13% of the population are co-habiting. Interestingly a third of adults have never been married, and Society now has 8 million people who live alone. Over a third of marriage fail – so statistically four of the couples I marry this year will not remain married. Before we get too depressed, eight of the couples I marry will live together hopefully to a ripe old age, and will always remember us with fondness (I hope).

In the 1970s half of this country’s marriages took place in religious buildings, now it is less than a quarter. I suspect that Covid will have depleted that even more. The argument that we must keep village churches open as people want to get married in them is false – sadly very few people want to get married in these lovely buildings. So, those of you who use these buildings, we need to welcome those who do come, and we need to let everyone know these lovely buildings are here for them – and those of you who do get married here, we need you to be our ambassadors.



Of course marriage is changing in other ways too. The Church of England has recently produced this report “Living in Love and Faith”, about “Christian teaching and learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage”. It is primarily as we face questions about same-sex marriage and how the church relates to people in relationships that are not the traditional man/woman, husband/wife. I read the report week before last and, even though I like to think I am a liberal, up-to-date, sensible Christian, I was struggling with some of the questions and concepts. I don’t know how we move the Church of England forward, I don’t know how we say to people that the Christian faith is relevant whatever your relationship is, how do we preach God’s love, how do we celebrate all the different types of love we see out there. The Cathedral is running some Zoom meetings in Lent as we work through it, and I hope people from our churches will join in.



Brampton, Cumbria

Enough of all this – let’s just join Jesus and the disciples as they celebrate with a happy couple. I love that this first miracle, happens in such a normal part of village life. You can imagine the village wedding, the happy couple. I’d love to know what their names were. (Probably John suffered from the same problem as me – trying to remember what their names were!). Sounds quite an impressive wedding – enough people coming that they could invite “Jesus and his disciples”. Another 13, yes, no problem – and there is the bride’s mother wondering where she can sit them. A good party, and the wine runs out. Can you imagine the embarrassment – this will be the village wedding they talk about for years – the name of the couple, the name of their parents, named and shamed, that’s the wedding where they ran out of booze.

Fortunately Mary, Jesus's mother, is there – perhaps the fact that she alerts her son suggests she is close to the wedding families and has prior knowledge there's a problem. Does she recognise Jesus's power, is there something in her which says, now, time to start that ministry you've been preparing for – or is she just saying 'They have no wine?' Jesus doesn't seem keen to sort it – perhaps he is struggling with the knowledge that at this point his normal human existence is going to end, that he must start on a path that leads to the cross. Perhaps he just needed a minute or two, perhaps he needed a drink – and his mum gets things moving. 'Do whatever he tells you', she says to the servants.

Hang on a minute, 20 or 30 gallons a water-jar, six water jars – so that's somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons. It's no good asking a teetotaler how much that works out at – so I asked google. Apparently there's about five wine bottles in a gallon, so we're not much short of 900 bottles. Jesus is not just giving them what they need, he is not just giving them what they can handle – he is giving them far more than they need.



Hungerford Berkshire

This is not just generous, this is over the top. Can you imagine the hangover the following morning? I have this vision of Peter the fisherman asleep in the corner, of John the young disciple nursing his first morning-after (and then remembering his pounding head as he wrote his gospel many years later), and Mary saying to her son, "did you need to produce quite so much?"

I love it too that it is the best wine. Again, this teetotaler doesn't have much understanding what the best wine tastes like – most of you, since we are Allestree/Darley Abbey, knows what the best tastes like – none of your cheap plonk here. Our Lord is not someone who gives us second best, the inferior stuff – he gives the very best.



And we're all excited by that, content with that, we love our generous God. But it's a high bar to live up to – I love weddings, but just sometimes being welcoming, being generous, it all gets a bit much. The culture of generosity, love and friendship we try and build in our churches does take effort, and it can involve pain. “Grief is the price we pay for love” is a phrase I've used before – and we knew grief as well as love in the weddings of the last couple of years, there have been many sacrifices in the life of our churches, in our relationships with each other. Yet I do believe that the culture of generosity, love and friendship we try and build in our churches is strong enough even when a pandemic hits, when evil ruins relationships and life is tough.

‘Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.’ It is Christ's glory we are proclaiming – we believe he is at work in our church and our community, and in our lives. We believe in him, not just as a God of the past, as someone who inspired Walter Evans to build this church, but who has inspired generations of people before and since – a Saviour who inspires us. Belief challenges us, belief makes us work, belief sustains us when the going gets tough. As we serve the world we make a difference to people's lives, and we are touched, changed, and empowered as God works in us all.

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