

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We're now in the season of Epiphany. And epiphany is a word which means to make manifest or to reveal. And it's a word that's entered our common vocabulary. We might hear somebody say, "Oh, I had a great epiphany yesterday." It means they had an aha moment. Something has become clear to them. Something has been revealed. And last week, we were thinking about the wise men who came to visit Jesus. The importance of their visit was that they fulfilled the prophecy that the coming of Jesus would be a revelation to the Gentiles. They were from nations in the east. Their presence at the birth of Jesus demonstrates that Jesus did not come solely for the Jewish people. His coming was God revealing himself to all people, Jew and Gentile alike.

And the miracle that we've just heard from John's gospel is read in this season because it says at the end, this was the first of Jesus' signs and it revealed his glory. It's an unusual story in many ways and I'm just going to pick out three of the elements which strike me at first reading as a bit odd. The first is that whilst this great miracle is said to reveal Jesus' glory, not everybody there recognized it as a miracle. It wasn't a revelation to all the witnesses. There are two perspectives in the story. There are the disciples who saw what happened at the wedding as a miraculous sign that revealed Jesus' glory, and there are others in the story who didn't see anything miraculous happening at all.

Let's look at this story from the perspective of the steward who might be thought of as being like the best man of the wedding. And if you've been a best man, you know that you can't relax at the wedding until everyone's gone home because if a problem comes up, you have to try and solve it. And here, the steward or best man, the problem that came to him was that the wine was running out. He was probably aware of a kerfuffle over at the side between a man and a middle-aged woman. Nothing particularly unusual there. And then just as things are getting desperate, the servants come carrying six large jars filled with wine. And the best man tastes it and likes it and notice who he thanks for the wine. He went to

the bridegroom and says, "You've kept the best wine till now."

So as far as the best man is concerned, the only unusual thing that has happened at this wedding is that the bridegroom has been foolish enough to spend his hard-earned cash on wine which everyone was too sloshed to appreciate. He was completely unaware of Jesus' involvement. And as far as the best man is concerned, nothing miraculous has happened in this miracle story.

But look at the story from the perspective of the disciples. To them, the whole incident reveals Jesus' glory. It was enough to make them put their faith in Jesus. So, what had they seen that the best man had missed? Well, they saw where the wine had come from. The disciples saw that what was really unusual about the wine wasn't that the best wine had been kept till last, but rather that a few minutes earlier, it had been water. The disciples recognized Jesus' miraculous work. To the best man, the wine was good, but nothing particularly out of the ordinary. The disciples saw it as a miracle. They saw something different.

And what was true then is still true now. There are still very different perspectives on Jesus and his ministry. We all have different ways of understanding what was happening in the gospels. Everyone, both inside the church and outside, can agree that Jesus was a historical figure. We can all probably just about agree that he was a significant religious teacher. But whilst some of us see Jesus as the revelation of the God who created the world, others see nothing more than a religious teacher. It's just like what happened at Cana. Some saw a miracle, others didn't. So today, some see Jesus reflecting God's glory, others don't. There'll be people walking past the church this morning who think that we are simply engaged as a like-minded club of people just enjoying some old-fashioned ecclesiastical tradition. They don't see that we're engaged in a deeply spiritual and significant calling to offer worship to our creator God. There are still very different perceptions of spiritual realities.

Another unusual thing about this miracle story is that it stands alone in the narrative. All the other miracle stories in John are embedded in significant pieces of

Jesus' teaching, but not this one. This miracle stands alone and doesn't seem to illustrate at first sight a spiritual teaching point. In fact, many people have wondered why it was included at all. No one is healed, no sins are forgiven, no teaching point is made. It's simply a miracle story that allows the party to continue. Some might think that as miracles go, this is a touch frivolous. They might wonder if Jesus' miraculous powers might have been put to better use.

And there are many things that could be said in response to that question, but as I was thinking about it, the first thing that occurred to me was our project to renew the organ and refurbish the church. I'm sensitive to those who think that the \$3.5 million we're raising for that project could be spent in other ways. As such a view is expressed in the gospels, when a woman poured expensive ointment over Jesus' feet, the disciples said, "What a waste of money. It could have gone to of the poor."

When it comes to Jesus and our worship of him, we're called to give of our best. It's noteworthy in the story that the new wine was really good, not simply passable or good enough. Of course, there's a point that giving of our best could become simply indulgent and wasteful, but I think we are some way from that. Our worship, the beautiful building in which we worship, our music are at the center of what we do here at St. James. And to stay with the wine imagery, we're looking in our project not to offer a vin de table, but we're looking to offer the best that Napa Valley has to offer.

The final unusual element in the story is that so much of the good quality wine was produced. Six stone jars holding up to 30 gallons. That's nearly 180 gallons. That's a ridiculous amount of wine. No wedding party could possibly drink that amount, although they might have had fun trying. The key point about the jars is not their size. It's what they were used for and their number. Six jars used for Jewish rights of purification and such ceremonial washing was prescribed in great detail in the Jewish law. And keeping those laws, doing things like washing in the right way was thought at the time to please God and was the way to earn his salvation. So, the number six

is important because seven was considered a perfect number. Six was imperfect, incomplete.

So, there's an important message being conveyed in this miracle. Jesus has come to do away with the imperfections of the Jewish law, and that way of understanding salvation is a prize that we get for good behavior, being suitably religious and doing the right thing. The new wine is a sign of this new gospel of grace that comes with Jesus. There's a constant refrain in the New Testament which is being illustrated here, that we don't earn our salvation by following laws, be they about ceremonial washing or whatever, or doing the right thing. Salvation comes as a gift. We don't earn our salvation; it comes as a gift. That's what Jesus' ministry was all about. His life and his death and his resurrection were about that new life based on the unmerited gift of grace of God to us in Jesus Christ, a gift which is offered to all.

Which takes us back to where we began with the wise men, those non-Jews who came to worship the Christ child. In this season of epiphany, we celebrate the fact that the rich, abundant grace of God is revealed, made known, and offered to all people. God revealed himself to us and everyone in the person of Jesus Christ. He held nothing back in that revelation. So may the response to the grace that he has shown us in Jesus be similarly abundant. Amen.