

Isaiah 62:1-5 • Psalm 36:5-10 • I Corinthians 12:1-11 • John 2:1-11 • Second Sunday after the Epiphany • January 17, 2010 • St. Thomas, Hanover, New Hampshire

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

This morning I would like to talk about two seemingly, very different topics that have been brought together by the particular juxtaposition of today's lessons and collect. The topics are new beginnings and Christ as guest.

There are moments in life when it is time to begin again. For most of us, a new calendar year presents itself as such a time—time to take stock and perhaps make a few changes, in other words, begin again. Change comes about when we acknowledge what we wish to do and take steps to do it. Change comes about when we take the 'some day' and exchange it for 'today.'

During Epiphany, we read Gospel stories that present Jesus' divine nature 'made manifest.' Manifest means more than 'appeared.' It involves our knowing as much as our seeing. Christ's invisible nature becomes visible with the eye of understanding and the Gospel writers bear witness.

Today's Gospel story is set near the beginning of Jesus' ministry and is a story that brings together today's two topics. It takes place at a wedding, another of life's moments that marks a new beginning.

At weddings, we surround ourselves with those who are closest to us and at this one Mary and Jesus and the disciples were amongst the invited guests. On the surface, this is the most human of celebrations. The response of Jesus to the invitation and his participation as a guest was probably not so very different from what we do today. I would like to think that Jesus both experienced and brought joy to this occasion.

But of course, Jesus did do a major new thing at this particular wedding. We celebrate Jesus' first miracle of turning water into wine every year at the beginning of Epiphany because this miracle exemplifies Jesus' entire earthly ministry. Here's what I mean by that.

First, this sign represents the abundance of God. Six stone water jars, each containing 30 gallons or so would amount to about 150 gallons of wine. I have read scholarly analyses of how many guests there must have been, how much wine would have been consumed per person, what Jesus' relationship may have been with the bride or groom... but I think those details are entirely beside the point. The Gospel writer has supplied just enough information to let us know that Jesus met a need and did so with liberality. His entire ministry was characterized by generosity and abundance.

Second, by this miracle, Jesus did not draw attention to himself, but his glory was manifest nonetheless, pointing beyond himself to God. This was the very issue about which Paul was speaking in our reading from First Corinthians today. Paul notes that there are a variety of gifts, activities, and ways to serve in evidence amongst the Corinthian Christians. “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12.7), he wrote. Some in the group were apparently more concerned about themselves and their own position within the church than they were with the common good. God’s Spirit should be evident in the exercise of all our gifts. Like light, which can’t help but reveal what is around us, God’s Spirit illuminates and reveals God’s work. This is confirmed in the example of Jesus’ life and ministry.

Over the next several weeks, we shall continue to read sequentially from this letter to the Corinthian Christians and we shall hear much more about how church members can work together for the benefit of all and for the glory of God. Paul’s hope was that his letter would serve as a corrective, so those early Christians could change for the better and begin again.

Third, Jesus’ miracle of turning water into wine is about transformation. The water in those jars was to be used for purification, for a very practical purpose.

The wine had no such strictly practical use, but would have added to the joy and fullness of the occasion. Symbolically, the water stood for the old ways, the fulfillment of the ancient laws. The wine stood for the new way to relate to God that Jesus was bringing into the world. A miracle, by its very definition, turns expectation on its head. By turning water into wine, Jesus even transformed himself from guest to host.

At the time of communion, we sometimes sing the hymn “Come, risen Lord and deign to be our guest.” We acknowledge that humans have produced the bread and wine; we’ve set the table; we’ve invited Christ to be present with us. But the hymn goes on, “Come, risen Lord and deign to be our guest; nay, let us be thy guests; the feast is thine; thyself at thine own board make manifest in thine own Sacrament of Bread and Wine.”

(Hymnal 1986 #306, v. 1)

In offering our gifts back to God, we acknowledge God as creator of grapes and wheat, of life and love. And we acknowledge that Christ is more than guest. Our gifts, offered to God—all our gifts, not just the bread and wine—are not just accepted and kept. God offers our gifts back to us, transformed, and just as much a sign of his presence as was his first miracle at that wedding in Cana—the bread and wine come back to us as Christ’s own body and blood; the gift of our lives and love is offered back to us as His own hands and feet and heart.

As the world snapped to attention this week to focus on Haiti, the Bishop of Maine, the Right Reverend Stephen Lane suggested this compassionate response:

“In these early hours,” he wrote, “please practice three disciplines:

- 1. Pray for the hearts and souls of our brothers and sisters in Haiti. Pray for God's mercy and for the swift arrival of relief workers.
- 2. Give to Episcopal Relief and Development. ER&D will be the primary conduit for relief aid from the Episcopal Church and has the capacity [in place already] to work on the ground with other agencies in Haiti.
- 3. Practice patience as we wait for information to emerge. It's always tempting to want to jump right in. But please remember that Haiti has little capacity to receive aid. We will know better what to do in a few days.

In this disaster, as in all our lives,” he concluded, “we trust that God is with the people of Haiti and with all of us, working to bring light from darkness.”

His words were both practical and spiritual. In addition to a financial response, he rightly reminds us that a Christian life-view calls us, just as importantly, to respond with prayers that grow out of hope and trust in God’s never-failing mercy. In a situation that no one could have foreseen or desired, Haiti will find light and begin again.

This week on Wednesday evening, Bishop Robinson will come to St. Thomas because twelve people here want to begin again. There will be baptism and confirmation and reaffirmation of baptismal vows and people will be received into the Episcopal Church from other traditions. In the context of that service, we shall all have the opportunity to renew our baptismal covenant. We shall all have the opportunity to begin again. I hope that many of you will be able to come to that service, to support those in our midst who are seeking a deeper relationship with God and who are taking an official step. But I also hope that you will come to that service to begin again yourself, to be transformed, made new. Christ is present whenever we gather. Come, the guest invites you to shine with new life.

Amen.