



29 January 2017  
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany  
Choral Eucharist  
1 Corinthians 1 vv. 18–31  
John 2 vv. 1–11

## **Taste and Be..**

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Every now and then we can find ourselves out of our depth: In a situation where we can only really get by because of the kindness or indulgence of others. Being ruthlessly honest, for four years I was in that situation, on a committee – the College's High Table and Wine Committee. The Food bit was fine, but the key skill was wine-tasting and I wasn't well equipped. I didn't seem to have the capacity to differentiate taste sufficiently and therefore could not engage very successfully in describing that taste.

Describing taste is of course notoriously challenging and wine-tasting notes in particular can end up as a strange fusion of the poetic, obscure and surreal. It is very difficult to talk about the experience of taste: Almost immediately you are drawn into a world of metaphor, – 'well its like this – or like that'; or evoking particular sensations, 'imagine a crisp wintry morning on the Cotswolds' – a world of poetry or story-telling. Taste evokes; but it defies the butterfly net of language.

Our Gospel reading this morning pivots, of course, on an experience of taste, a taste of the unexpected, of that better wine. But like the challenge of taste, there is a certain 'difficult-to-grasp' quality about this story. The Wedding in Cana at Galilee is rather grandly called 'the first sign' of Jesus's ministry – which seems rather odd – for on the face of it, it looks like a conjuring trick on a colossal scale with alcohol, enough, 180 gallons, to float a John's May Ball, certainly plenty to create carnage at a wedding. Then there is the question of priorities 'So, the wine runs out, big deal - why is this so important that Jesus needs to act? Why is this the story the Evangelist John wants us to get at the beginning of his Gospel?

It is said of John's Gospel that it is deep enough 'for an elephant to swim in or a child to paddle in'. That is, incredibly sophisticated, but also possessing an elegant simplicity.

So what are these elephantine depths? Perhaps the most obvious is the way it develops Jesus's saying about old and new wine - and wineskins: Here John draws a contrast between what God has done in the past – through the prophets and Moses - and what he is doing in and through Christ. Like many religions and cultures – the Jews looked back and idolised a 'golden age' as being the time when God acted, the time of Moses and King David – the good vintages all seem to lie in the past – but the eccentric behaviour of the host in leaving the best wine to last – points in a different direction - the message confounds that expectation of glorying in the Past.

And there are other points flowing in a similar direction – it is the third day we are told – a clear reference to Resurrection, to transformation, to new life - but if you track back in the Gospel you will see it is also the seventh day in John's account – a day of completion, of fulfilment. It turns out God has saved up the best 'til last: the message of the wine is then the message of the gospel as a whole – of the fuller taste of the Good News that Christ brings.

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Whereas elsewhere, the Kingdom of God is like a Mustard seed in its hidden potential - here the metaphor overflows, spills over, it is riot of celebration; a joyous, raucous, community feast celebrating love, and the joyous union of lovers. This, says John, is the best image of the kingdom; this is the trailer; this a taste of what God intends. The imagery of the wedding and the flowing of wine, a picture of the future, of hope, reveals what God's ultimate intentions are for us. That before everything else; above, beneath, anything else, even his sacrificial death, Jesus comes to show the nature of God; God's desire that we should have 'life in all its fullness' and this is why this passage lies at the head of the Gospel – Christ makes manifest Joy in human beings.

The true way, the true religion is not like a sensible but resentful kind of dieting, the exclusive and joyless pursuit of the 'serious business' of doing good, being dutiful, separating ourselves from greed, from temptation – the way of the Puritan or the Stoic. Rather John says it is a feast, and as in marriage, God has made an absolute commitment to us. Of course much of married life is routine and joy can be a tricky customer who comes and goes; of course, like marriage, faith has to be worked at. But just as the true lover does not say 'I don't like this about you' or 'Why don't you change in this way or that', rather they say 'I want you to be you, all of you, your best you' – so God first and foremost and last 'delights in us'.

That is something we should really seek to understand - and learn to get a taste for.

Amen