

The First Miracle

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson on the Second Sunday after Pentecost, January 19, 1986, at Knox Presbyterian Church, Kenmore, NY. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 62:1-5, Psalm 36, I Corinthians 12:1-11, John 2:1-11.

Over the last several weeks I have been stopping at Liquor stores every day to pick up boxes for packing. The movers estimate that I'll need 100 boxes for my books. That's a lot of boxes. Since I was working on this sermon I tried to figure out how many boxes it would take to accomodate the wine that Jesus turned the water into. The Gospel of John tells us that he made at least 120 gallons of wine. A standard box contains 12, 1 liter carafes of wine. 120 gallons would fill over 40 boxes. That's 480, 1 liter carafes of wine. That's a lot of wine.

~~1. Our Lord's first miracle was to make wine.~~

Not it's a strange fact that the first miracle John records in his Gospel is Christ's production of wine- not a tiny sip, not even a glassful or a bottleful, but a hundred and twenty gallons of the stuff, and pretty strong stuff at that judging from the comments of one person who drank it. It's strange, isn't it? Strange expecially for those who believe that wine is wicked, which I don't, but strange that of all the miracles that St. John had to choose from to begin his account of the story of Jesus, he selected this one of making wine by the bucketfuls. 40 cartons of wine.

It's strange for another reason. Miracles were performed by Jesus not primarily for the pleasure of those for whom the miracles were performed. They weren't even performed, primarily, to display the power of Jesus. They were performed, primarily, to show his glory. They were performed, primarily, to reveal the visible presence of God in compassion, wisdom and love. So it's all the more strange to choose the making of cartons of wine for the purpose of manifesting to those who were there the glory of God in Jesus. Why not begin with forgiving a man's sins, by saving him from hell?

Why not begin with healing a leper or feeding the hungry? John could have chosen any of those miracles to begin his account of the story of Jesus but he chose this one. "This deed at Cana-in-Galilee is the first of the signs by which Jesus revealed his glory and led his disciples to believe in him." ~~That's the Gospel for this second Sunday after the Epiphany.~~

~~*2. The first meaning of the Kingdom of God*~~

How do you account for this? I think it can only be accounted for by a willingness to see that Christ wanted us to understand first, that the Kingdom of God is a joyous thing; it is like a wedding, not marriage- but like a wedding. Think of a wedding. Everyone is wearing his or her best clothes. Everyone is in a light-hearted mood. And even if tears are shed they're tears of joy. Deep down most people are really happy. They feel that something good and-right and proper is taking place—a wedding. And they enjoy it. After the wedding they go to the reception. They talk. They laugh. They dance. And a lot of times they drink wine.

But let's return to the story as it's told in the Gospel. There was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and Jesus and his mother and the disciples were invited. But something went wrong. That something that happened is so set in the story as to make it ~~the~~ overwhelming calamity at the wedding- the wine ran out. And Jesus' mother, becoming aware of it, told Jesus. And Jesus did nothing at first, but then he turned six large stone jars of water, each containing twenty or thirty gallons, or at least one hundred and twenty gallons, into wine. That water there in those stone jars wasn't for drinking, it was used for washing the feet. It was for the Old Testament laws of purification involving washing with water. These people wouldn't be able to keep the Old Testament Laws. They wouldn't be able to wash their hands or their utensils or their feet. They wouldn't be

able to purify themselves. Instead they had all this wine. They couldn't purify themselves with it. All they could do with it was to enjoy it. This is what Jesus turned into wine. And the quality of wine was such that the steward was amazed that it was saved for the last.

Now I can't tell you how the miracle was performed. But what I want you to notice is that Christ likened the Kingdom of God to the drinking frivolities of a wedding. John is telling us that for him the first sign that Jesus was the manifestation of God in the flesh was joy, merriment. Where Christ is, there *must* be joy, life, light and laughter. And if there isn't he'll change things. There're times when God's presence may bring to us a feeling of guilt or fear. But John is telling us that the first sign of Christ's presence is this: he turned water to wine. He brought joy out of the imminent disaster of a wedding without wine. This is the first indication he gave of his glory, and of what God's presence means.

And some people don't like this. Some even detest it. They're afraid of it. They don't want a religion which brings freedom and laughter, even at times frivolity. Religion is supposed to be a serious thing. So you attend meetings where long faced men and women cast a pall of death and guilt upon everything. You have people who come to church because they hope the minister will make them feel guilty about something. If religion doesn't make them gloomy and depressed and remind them of their sinfulness it's not worth much. That's what the Jewish rites of purification were suppose to do. The purification water was supposed to remind the Jews of their sins and their need of cleansing. Jesus did away with it and replace it with wine.

It was this miracle that brought the disciples of Jesus to faith in him. That's what John says. "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in

Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him."

In the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England, is a little statue, nineteen inches high, made in terra-cotta. It's supposed to be one of the great sculptures of the Virgin Mary and Child Jesus. No one knows exactly whose work it is. The only thing that's fairly certain is that it comes from the Italian Renaissance. The unique thing about this statue is that the child is laughing. He's not looking at his mother, he's looking at you as you look at him, and his face is bubbling with joy and laughter. And when you look at the Christ child laughing like that, as you look at any laughing child, you want to laugh too. And the Virgin Mary is also looking at Jesus with a smile of love and tenderness on her face. It's called "The Virgin and the laughing Christ."

Are there people here at Knox church who have been slow to grasp the truth that Christ presented the Kingdom of God (which means God's rule in our hearts) as a happy experience? Are there people who would prefer the Jewish waters of purification to the intoxicating wine of the Good News of Jesus. Of course Christians don't go around all the time with inane smiles on our faces as though nothing unsettling or sad or even tragic comes into our lives. But John wants us to know that the first sign of the presence of the Kingdom of Christ into our lives is joy, intoxicating joy. And when we dwell on the negative and the bad things and our failures and the failures of the church and the failures of our friends and family and neighbors something has gone wrong. It's the devil who takes away laughter, and it's Christ who gives it? And whenever people are deeply happy, there is a sign of Christ's presence. It's an epiphany of God's Kingdom.

Application

On Wednesday evenings during Advent and Epiphany a small group of people have been meeting over here to pray and celebrate the presence of Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. In two weeks, on February 2, we will again celebrate the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper, in the morning worship service as we do on the first Sunday of the month. At that time you will be offered wine (Actually, it isn't wine. It's grape juice. It should be wine and when we become a more Biblical church Christ will perform an even greater miracle than he did at Cana of Galilee by changing the grape juice to wine). And when I give that wine to you, ministering in his name, I will say something like, "The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life." As you think of the Cross you may think of it sadly. "The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which was shed for thee." But remember this: what is suppose to represent the blood is not water, nor is it kool-aid, nor vinegar, nor even grape juice, but wine. And wine, as the psalmist sang, "maketh glad the heart of man." Christ shed his blood, not to make us sad, but to make us happy. We haven't always given that impression, so maybe we especially need this Gospel for the second Sunday after Epiphany. Christ began his ministry by turning water into a hundred and twenty gallons of wine. I hope that none of us fails to see from this that Jesus meant Christian discipleship to be characterized first of all by an experience of intoxicating joy.

Let us pray:

I greatly acknowledge my indebtedness to D. W. Cleverly Ford (Preaching at the Parish Communion: Series One) for this sermon which I have nearly entirely plagiarized.