

LET THE WINE FLOW!

*Old Noah he had an ostrich farm and fowls on the largest scale,
He ate his egg with a ladle in a egg-cup big as a pail,
And the soup he took was Elephant Soup and the fish he took was Whale,
But they all were small to the cellar he took when he set out to sail,
And Noah he often said to his wife when he sat down to dine,
"I don't care where the water goes if it doesn't get into the wine." ¹*

Well, all I can say is that if old Noah had been at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, he really would have been all at sea! For far from keeping the water and wine separate, the wine actually came out of the water! And what a lot of it there was - anything from 120 gallons to 180 gallons!

As Calvin rather cheerily remarks in his Commentary, 'It was enough indeed for more than 150 people at a merry feast.'² I should say it was 'enough indeed' - 150 people to share 180 gallons of wine! The same Calvin, however, is determined not to leave us with the wrong impression. He observes that 'It is surprising that Christ, a teacher of self-control, should supply a large quantity of wine and that of the very best.' And he adds, 'When God daily provides us with plenty of wine it is our own fault if his kindness is an incitement to luxury; but it is an undoubted proof of our temperance if we are sparing and moderate in the midst of plenty.'³ Now, that's the kind of Calvinism I warm to - Calvinism which is not so much a matter of abstinence as of achieving the correct balance. But that is another story for another day.

Our story today is about water and wine. It is striking that St John is at pains to tell us that this changing the water into wine was the *first* of the signs by which Christ revealed his glory, or as the King James version of the Bible has it, 'it was the beginning of miracles.'⁴ The use of that word 'beginning' immediately throws us back to the start of St John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. . . . By him were all things made, and without him was not anything made that was made.'⁵ This in turn takes us back to the story of the beginning of creation, when 'In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. . . . And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.'⁶

Water in the beginning was an unruly element, and it needs to be managed still, otherwise it is a law unto itself, as the people of Cocker mouth so recently and alarmingly found out. Water seeks out and finds its own course even if it has to sweep away rocks and move mountains. We are helpless in the face of uncontrolled water, whether it pours down from the sky, or cascades headlong down mountains, or smashes through dams, or washes away bridges, or swallows up fields, or deluges streets and gardens and houses. It is on this element, so chaotic at the beginning and so unruly still, that Jesus performs his first miracle.

The same God who moved over the waters at Creation is exercising his creative power and authority over the waters at Cana in Galilee. The water in the six stone jars obeys him, just as the water in the Red Sea obeyed him when it parted to let Israel cross over; just as the water in the desert obeyed him when at the stroke of Moses' rod it gushed from the rock; just as the water in the clouds obeyed him when it teemed down on Noah's ark. Now, at the marriage in Cana of Galilee, the water obeys him, and at his word is turned into wine.

How was it done? Does it matter that we know? Or is it enough to say that that is as much beyond our comprehension as is the mystery of his presence on the first day of Creation when he moved over the waters with his Father and with the Spirit?

The thing to notice is that this Jesus who changed water into wine can change other things too. For one thing he can change *people*, change you and me. He can change us in such a way that we will no longer be as insipid water but will be as inspiring as wine; change us in such a way that we will no longer be a drag to others but will be as welcome to them as the wine was to the guests at the marriage in Cana. He can help us, for example, to control our anger, or to be less of a prey to despondency, or to be more able to resist temptation, or to be more grateful for the happiness we enjoy, or to be more charitable to our neighbour, or to be more understanding and willing to help. We needn't *always* be miserable, drained by life's struggles and wearied by its routines. Christ who changed water into wine can give us new faith, fresh courage, bracing hope.

As well as our personal life, Christ can invigorate our *family life*. If we ourselves have the springs of joy renewed in us by Christ, others close to us will be affected by it. Relationships with fractious children, for instance, or with difficult brothers and sisters, or with other members of the family who sometimes give the frustrating impression that they will remain unaffected by any amount of indulgence or severity, can be influenced by our belief that Christ has the power to change water into wine. Prayer in his name, good cheer in his company, patience from his presence, should help to bring them and us safely and happily through at least some of the trials of family living.

Then, what about *marriage* itself? When we see a marriage which has lost its sparkle; when we see married people living despondent and discouraged lives, because each partner has lost confidence in the other; when we see they are now reluctantly resigned to their present strained and sad relationship: we may assume that they have lost all hope that things can ever change. But Christ has the power to change water into wine! Indeed, it was at a marriage he first did it, and he can do it still. For too many people today, divorce seems an easy way out, but it often produces as much if not more misery, especially if there are children of the marriage. We need to encourage in folk the belief that if marriage becomes as stale as water standing in a stone jar, it can yet be transformed to the wine that gladdens the heart and sustains the spirit by the lively and loving company of Jesus.

And what about *politics* and *business*? Can we even for a moment believe in what happened at Cana of Galilee *without* taking our belief with us to work tomorrow? We can go to our business armed with the conviction that Christ can transform everything, giving us patience to cope with people, grace to admit and redress wrongs, calmness to accept disappointment when our value goes unrecognised and we are passed over for promotion - in short, peace of mind even when the wine runs out, so to speak, and everything is in disarray. Oh, if only a ray of the glory of Christ could be allowed to shine at our work, what a difference there would be!

And the same Christ who has power to change water into wine has power also to direct the hearts of a nation, the hearts and thoughts of statesmen and members of parliament; the hearts and thoughts of writers and journalists, of preachers and teachers, of artists and architects; the

hearts and thoughts of television directors, newspaper editors, financiers, shareholders, doctors, nurses, administrators, lawyers; the hearts and thoughts of all the people who constitute our society, whether they be old or young, sick or well, employed or unemployed, male or female. Our forebears believed that God could change the life of a nation. John Knox, for instance, believed in a new Scotland, and he risked his life for the renewal of the people. And what God did once, he can do again, as I believe he is now doing in Iraq, and may yet do in Afghanistan. We must never lose our faith in the miracle Jesus performed in Cana: it is a miracle of change and transformation he can perform in any city and in any country in the world.

This changing of the water into wine gives everybody hope, and not least those who are *growing old*. Did you notice how the story ends? The master of the feast tasted the wine, then he hailed the bridegroom and said, 'Everyone else serves the best wine first and the poorer only when the guests have drunk freely; but you have kept the best to the end.' People should think *positively* about the end, think positively about old age and about being old. God keeps the best to the end, and though increasing years bring their share of aches and pains and limitations, they bring also many blessings of maturity and peace.

*"Give us for wine the wine of youth," men say,
"Drawn in the shining morning of our day."
But they who have the Master as their guest
Drink at the last the best.*⁷

Let me finish by offering you an engaging thought: you and I are meant to be like wine, like good wine, generous and kindly to life's palate. Our task in life is to be happy in God, and to bring his happiness wherever we go. Robert Louis Stevenson's prayer should be our prayer too:

*If I have faltered more or less
In my great task of happiness;
If I have moved among my race
And shown no glorious morning face . . .
lord, thy most pointed pleasure take
And stab my spirit broad awake.*⁸

With Christ as our constant companion, we ought to be able to change the world of water into a world of wine and make it altogether a merrier place. Now there's a thought! - a world of wine (claret would be my choice - you may please yourselves!), of good cheer and friendship, of loving hearts and joyful spirits, of laughter instead of tears, and courage instead of fears. And with the presence and the power of Christ, you and I can help to make it happen!

May God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word.
And to God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

(1827)
17 January 2010

1. *Wine and Water*, from *The Flying Inn* John Lane Company New York 1914

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2. *The Gospel According to St John 1 - 10* Translator T H L Parker Edited by D W Torrance, T F T Torrance Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh 1959 p. 48
 - 3.. *ibidem* p. 49
 - 4.. *St John 2: 11* Authorised Version
 - 5.. *St John 1: 1 - 4*
 - 6.. *Genesis 1: 1 - 4*
 7. . by J W H in *Through the Christian Year* Arranged by G F Bradby and J W Hunkin Student Christian Movement Press 1933 p. 29
 - 8.. *The Celestial Surgeon* R L Stevenson