

This is the second in a series of 4 sermons by Felicity on the theme of 'Faith, Church, and Ministry' from Epiphany to Candlemas 2022.

1. Being Shown and Being Changed
2. Faith in Community
3. A Church Gathered Around Jesus Christ
4. Living as the Light of Christ

Thank you for your responses so far which have been really thoughtful and varied. Please do engage with me if any thoughts in these sermons strike a chord for you (in any way). I truly believe that a sermon is not the best way of communicating but these four sermons are offered as a starting point to get us thinking together...

The Second Sunday of Epiphany: 'Faith in Community'

The Wedding Feast at Cana: John 2. 1-11

The Parable of the Prince, the Politician, and the Superstar makes for uncomfortable reading. Those who watch events unfold, twist upon ghastly twist, find themselves more and more angry and let down by what looks like abuse of privilege, one rule for us and another for them. We don't know how any of these stories will end but it seems clear that the lives and the expectations of the prince, the politician, and the superstar are very separate and very different from our lives. This sense of separation is their downfall – 1 rule for us and another for them!

In her pregnancy, Mary sang praises to the God of justice whose love and mercy show a bias to the poor and the voiceless. Mary's words (the Magnificat) will be sung tonight in choral evensong:

*He has scattered the proud in their conceit,
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich He has sent away empty. (see Luke 1. 46-55)*

In today's gospel Mary's babe has grown up and her role is behind the scenes: to encourage him, and to encourage others to trust him. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Let's cut back to John's gospel. Note that this is only chapter 2, and if you remember half of chapter 1 was about 'in the beginning' where the word was God and was with God, and the Word has now been made flesh. It goes on to tell of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus and the calling of his disciples. When today's gospel starts (verse 1 of chapter 2) nothing else has happened. Jesus has not taught his disciples anything, there have been no healings, no crowds of people following Jesus, no personal encounters beyond the disciples coming to him. Jesus has a holy magnetism about him, (John has identified him as the Lamb of God) but that is all that the disciples know, and they probably don't understand too much about this new rabbi with a peculiarly charismatic attraction.

In our culture when we start a new role we are generally supposed to be given training for it, an induction period, and ongoing management / support. In John's gospel what is the first thing that Jesus does with his new recruits? He doesn't give them the manual of policies and procedures, he doesn't take them aside for special teaching (though there will be plenty of that later), he takes them to a party!

It wasn't a work party. They didn't bring their own booze! It was a joyful gathering together of the whole village around the bridegroom and his bride. It would probably have lasted several days and absolutely everyone would be there, dancing, singing, talking, eating and drinking. Hospitality given to everyone was very important. At this point preachers usually skip to the moment when the wine ran out, but let's linger a little longer in the party and ask what it means. **Jesus has not taken his followers away from the community; he has led them right into the heart of it.** If first things are important we should notice this and ponder it as the first step in the disciples' apprenticeship. Whatever their role will be as they follow the new rabbi, it seems to be about being involved in the whole life of the ordinary people. Other religious sects at that time stressed how important it was to be separate and holy, set apart from

others; Jesus is immediately showing his disciples, and us, something different. It fits with his birth as Emmanuel (God-With -Us) and his last promise "I am with you, even to the end of time". Even before performing his first miracle, Jesus is shown to us as the God who comes right into the heart of our community.

And then the wine runs out. This was a social disaster for the host. He could have sent someone with a suitcase to the off licence! (How many bottles can you fit in a suitcase and still be able to carry / wheel it?) Jesus is reluctant to become a miracle worker at this early stage, but he does understand the extreme embarrassment for his host and the needs of the community, and his Mum is persuasive though not overly pushy. Her quiet faith in him is justified as the crisis is averted. Ordinary water has become at his will the very best quality wine. He did not touch it or say any magic words; the servants filled the jars with water (they did the actions) he just willed it. It reminds us again of 'in the beginning' where God willed 'let there be light ... and there was light'. "Let there be wine... and there was wine – of the very best kind".

On this second Sunday of Epiphany (the season of showing) **what are we being shown about who Jesus is?**

- He is Emmanuel God-with-us in the heart of daily life, sharing joys and sorrows with ordinary people.
- He is that same God who 'in the beginning' just had to will things into existence
- He is the one who transforms ordinariness into the most extraordinary, rich, fruitful life in all its abundance (*John 10.10 "I am come that they may have life and have it in abundance"*)

And **what are we being shown about who we are?**

Followers of Jesus need to be involved, just as he is, in all aspects of common life, there is nothing separate about our faith. Our worship and service is not exclusively inside church buildings, and is not confined to the saying of prayers and the singing of hymns. It is lived out amongst others in the parties (but please keep it to the legal ones), the daily tasks,

in the high street, and in every aspect of our society. In our parish we think this is so important that we have said it in our mission statement:

Our mission is: *"To serve the people of Kidlington and Hampton Poyle for their own sake"*

In a recent exercise our PCC chose as their most important words to define our ministry: *'outward-looking' 'prayerful' and 'compassionate'*.

We come to worship in order to connect with God, who then sends us out to live our faith in the high street... Sunday worship should equip us for the rest of life. Like wedding guests, we bring our gifts to the altar; bread, wine, and our very selves. And like the water in those big jars, God's grace can take us and transform us – change us – into something that we never imagined.

Our limited vision sets blinkers on what we think is possible, but with God all things are possible, and he is always at work, transforming what looks pretty uninspiring, under-resourced, damaged, broken, and even hopeless.... Into wonderful new things. "Behold I am making all things new" he says (*Rev 21.5*). And he does it not in a separate holy place, but in the messy middle of the community.

As the established Anglican church we have the opportunity to be at the heart of our local community, involved in as much of its life as possible, playing our full part in its joys and sorrows, and using our resources for the benefit of local people. In Anglican ecclesiology this is what a true parish church is all about. And in our particular case our reach into the local community is potentially huge, so it is up to us to make of it what we will. (Think of 'The Hub' project, all the families who come for baptism and funerals, choristers drawn from local primary schools, community groups....) Remember from last week that we said that God is already out there ahead of us; it is for us to notice where he is at work and come alongside him.

I am going to close with some thoughts from Remembrance Sunday this year. Our service inside was beautifully planned to be both traditional and contemporary. It was thoughtful, creative and visual and we even included a piece of liturgical dance. What we did was done really well and was really well received. We served the congregation of about 150 really well.

But when we got outside we met a crowd of about 2000 who had turned out to pay their respects. This is many more than usual (and there may be many reasons why that was so but it set me thinking). Those who lined the streets may not ever become church go-ers but they are willing to think beyond themselves, disrupt their normal Sunday routines and be part of something bigger than themselves – and this matters.

After the wreath laying, the procession moved away from the church up the High Street to the centre of the village. I had been invited to take the salute and then to a (perfectly legal) lunch party in Exeter Hall.

The real heartbeat of the occasion was outside the church, even though we had done a rather wonderful church service. And the even more wonderful thing is that the church is invited to be part of it – so it's up to us what we make of this invitation. Very many doors are open to us, as the Anglican church in this place; they are open for us to walk through, but sometimes we need to leave our buildings behind in order to do that, and we may need to reorganise our limited resources so that we can be more present in other places where God is at work.

We really can be at the heart of our community. We can go with Jesus to the party where all the village are gathered, and be transformed by the God who changes the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Or we can stand at the church doors, wave good bye, and be left behind as the procession moves off up the High Street and into the village centre. I know where I want to be and I think I know where Jesus is.

May God's hand be on us all to lead us together from water to wine.