

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



SECOND SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY

19 January 2024

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Revd Canon Matthew Vernon

Whilst we are here this morning, humpback whales are cruising through the world's seas - a humpback was even seen off the coast of Kent a few days ago. This morning, black bears are hibernating in caves in North America. In Australia, kangaroos are trying not to overheat in the height of summer. Elsewhere, a cheetah in Kenya is watching a group of impalas, waiting to strike. In the Amazon rainforest, three-toed sloths are hanging around in the Sangrillo trees. Close by, stingless bees are exploring the yellowish flowers of the Sangrillo trees. Meanwhile, Iridescent Jewel Beetles are busy in western India. And in southern China, a red panda is waking up before a night of activity. All the time, in the deep Antarctic Ocean, angler fish wait for their prey to swim close to their bioluminescent bait.

Owls and kingfishers, roses and oak trees, otters and voles, butterflies and spiders, salmon and sticklebacks. Umbrella birds and toucans; dancing lady orchids and amazon water lilies; proboscis monkeys and pygmy sloths; harlequin beetles and darter dragonflies. God's generosity and variety is amazing. Creatures large and small, weird and wonderful, ugly and beautiful.

Remarkably, of all the known forms of life, just 1% are living today. The other 99% have all existed and have now gone forever: from the earliest bizarrely formed fish to the wonderful and frightening dinosaurs. They make up an unimaginably enormous number of species - a number that tells of the bountiful, glorious generosity of the Spirit of Life, of God.

Why so many forms of life? Why not just a few dozen types of bird and a few score varieties of insects, with some animals and fish thrown in? The Source of Existence keeps going on one wild tangent after another, or millions at the same time, with an exuberance that seems unnecessary, with irresponsible abandon. Why the golden flash of the diving kingfisher? Why the rapid knock of the burrowing woodpecker? Why the gold and black of the bumblebee? Because God loves diversity and variety. God loves abundance and plenty. God loves to extend the rich, colourful, super-abundant tapestry of creation. God is immeasurably generous with the gift of life.

The writer of John's Gospel wants us to know the abundance of life in God. So the Wedding in Cana is right at the beginning of the Gospel, chapter 2. It's the first of the signs of Jesus - signs which reveal his glory - in this case a super-abundance of wine: six water-jars each holding 20-30 gallons. Prof David Ford suggests that the Wedding in Cana is a concrete example of what John's famous Prologue describes: "the creative Word utterly involved in material reality, living among us, and showing the glory of a God of love, abundance, and grace".¹

The Wedding in Cana is unique to the Gospel of John. There is no equivalent story in the other three gospels. "John tells the signs of who Jesus is and the life Jesus gives - abundant life - far beyond our imagining ... inexhaustibly rich, generative, surprising, and even intoxicating."

The great American poet Richard Wilbur wrote "A Wedding Toast" for his son's wedding:

¹ This quote and the quotes that follow are from David Ford, "The Gospel of John A Theological Commentary", page 61ff, the chapter on John 2.1-25

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St. John tells how, at Cana's wedding-feast,
The water-pots poured wine in such amount
That by his sober count
There were a hundred gallons at the least.

It made no earthly sense, unless to show
How whatsoever love elects to bless
Brims to a sweet excess
That can without depletion overflow.

Which is to say that what love sees is true,
That the world's fullness is not made but found.
Life hungers to abound
And pour its plenty out for such as you.

Now, if your loves will lend an ear to mine,
I toast you both, good son and dear new daughter.
May you not lack for water,
And may that water smack of Cana's wine.²

Neither glass half full or glass half empty comes close. The cup of God is overflowing. The chalices of God run over. All we have to do is notice and join in; notice and respond in kind. There are times in our lives, frequent times, when gratitude is hard – because our pains and wounds overwhelm us. John encourages us by showing us how Christ is “in solidarity with and transforming what he is part of”, even a wedding in crisis with no wine.

I love a wedding. Most of us do! The joy is uplifting and contagious. “A wedding is a burst of joy, a celebration of the beginning of a new family, with new naming and the anticipation of new life. It resonates across cultures and generations.” The love and generosity echo in our hearts because they reflect the love and generosity of God at the depths of our being.

And right now, whilst we are here, creatures great and small, all round our planet, are demonstrating that abundance.

² In David Ford “The Gospel of John A Theological Commentary” p.69