**16th January 2022**

It’s time to celebrate, time to party.
Come, see Jesus, the one who delights us,
the one who delights in us, the one whose miraculous grace
can change us into something beautiful.



**A gathering prayer**

Creator God, abundant giver, at a wedding in Cana
you turned the ordinary into the extraordinary.
We come to you, ready for you to turn our ordinariness
into something extraordinary for you today.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of approach**

In the middle of the longest and darkest month of the year,
on an ordinary Sunday, bereft of celebration or feast,
we come to you, O God of change and transformation,
seeking a drop of the divine, a glimpse of your glory.
Transform our day by changing our way of seeing, we pray.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

God, who called all things into being from nothing,
**we adore you.**
Christ, who combined the human and divine in equal measure,
**we adore you.**
Holy Spirit, who enables the ordinary within us to become extraordinary,
**we adore you.**
**Amen.**



**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Lord God, we confess that the daily grind consumes us.
We struggle to see beyond the needs of day-to-day life.
We don’t lift our eyes to heaven for inspiration, let alone miracle.
We are chained to earthly demands.
Forgive us, Lord, for our lack of faith and imagination;
we look to you for transformation.
Forgive us for failing to open our minds to the miracles of living;
open our eyes, change our thinking and understanding.
Come, Lord, transform our way of being;
make us vessels wherein the ordinary becomes extraordinary,
for Jesus’ sake.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Lord God, we thank you for forgiving us when we forget;
when, in the midst of cares and woes, we forget what you can do.
Thank you for surprising us at such times, Lord,
by forgiving us when we’ve forgotten what it is to go astray
in thought and attitude as well as deeds.
Our minds mired in the murk of anxiety about our needs and wants,
you surprise us with a reminder of your presence, generous in your bounty
– just like Jesus at the wedding in Cana. Lord,
who transforms water into wine,
thank you for your transforming power in our lives.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

We thank you, Lord Jesus, for the gifts we so often take for granted.
Thank you for water to drink and to cleanse,
and to nurture crops and flowers.
Thank you for food to eat and to share with friends and family,
gathered round the kitchen table or at a great feast.
We praise you, Lord, for surprising us sometimes
by lifting these things above the ordinariness of every day.
When we break bread with other believers,
we are blessed by your presence also, the unseen guest.
An ordinary meal becomes a celebration when laughter and cheer are shared.
All praise and thanks be to you for the everyday miracles that transform our lives.
**Amen.**

**John 2.1-11**

Sunday's lectionary gospel reading is, ironically, Jesus turning up to a party that turns out for him to be a work event with wine. We are not told how long he stays, but obviously long enough to make a difference. This is a remarkable example of Bring Your Own Booze. Nobody is quite sure what happens, but it gets discussed and debated for ages afterwards.

Who said the Bible isn’t relevant for today?

And what a party. This isn’t just turning a bottle of water into wine but 6 stone jars each holding 80 to 120 litres. That’s anything from 500 to over 600 litres of wine. You could have a bath in it. You could swim in it. I know most of the village would probably have been at the wedding but that’s still a lot of booze.

In my older version of my bible, it gave the total in gallons – 20 to 30 gallons. My kids asked what are gallons? Remember when you bought petrol in gallons. I remember my dad sucking his teeth when the price went over £1 a gallon. It would be just under £7 a gallon now.

A swimming pool of wine. The moral of the story is: invite Jesus to your party.

It is a shocking story.

Joan Kingham, one of our great church stalwarts, a pillar of this church for several decades, who died at the age of 99 four years ago, was an ardent tee totaller. She was brought up at a time when the Temperance movement was strong and militant, when there was great concern at the turn to alcohol by many who had lived through the trauma of the Great War and were drowning their sorrows in drink. The movement was largely led by churchgoers and women, who were concerned for their safety and security at home as their menfolk were spending all the hard-earned money on booze and getting into the grip of that terrible addiction. It is still a social problem today of course. Sadly, our society doesn’t know how to enjoy itself and have fun, without the aid of alcohol. It is prevalent in culture: having a good time involves consuming alcohol is the tie up.

Joan stood in opposition for many years against this church being licensed to serve alcohol at events. I used to pull her leg about this story of the wedding feast at Cana.

‘But Joan Jesus turned water into wine’ I said. ‘Yes, I don’t approve’ she replied

But not just water into wine. Lots of it. Enough to swim in it. ‘Shocking’ she tuttered.

It is shocking.

What is John trying to say in writing this story?

It’s the first sign in John’s Gospel, one of several where John is keen to show that Jesus is in fact the Messiah, the one who will mark the restoration of God’s relationship with the people of Israel and bring blessing to the whole world. John is big on signs they are important to him, scholars argue how many there are in his Gospel, six, seven or eight, but we kick off here at the wedding and go through healing and walking on water and feeding the five thousand before quite a climax with bringing Lazarus back to life.

Clare Nutbrown Hughes shared a reflection at our elders Meeting on Tuesday night about this sign of transformation and change, from something plain and ordinary like water into something extraordinary and a blessing: wine. She wrote this.

What I find interesting with this sign is that in taking six stone jars filled with between 20-30 gallons of everyday water and turning them into the finest wine, not only is Jesus turning the ordinary into the extraordinary and doing something wildly extravagant, but this miracle goes largely unseen. Only the servants who fetch the water and bring the wine and the disciples know. In fact the steward compliments the bridegroom, the praise goes not where it is earned at all.

Turning the ordinary into the extraordinary was something that I felt happened on Christmas Eve with our food surplus deliveries and indeed, is happening week in week out with bags on doorsteps, with flowers that are their own kind of sign that you are loved, you are not forgotten.

We are literally taking that which is destined for the bin and turning it into a blessing.

Of course it isn’t as simple as that, there are no doubt times when the food isn’t great or fitting and the volunteers are left with a few blackened bananas and a load of cardboard for their own bins, but in a general sense, I believe, something extraordinary is happening.

And on Christmas Eve we had a team of volunteers including two who aren’t church members helping to collect, carry, sort, deliver food to 37 homes across the area including enormous great turkeys and a £50 Sainsburys voucher in each. These were families who proactively signed up to receive a random, Christmas Eve gift from the Tab.

Across 2021, the list of regular recipients grew with over 1,000 bags going out, over 250 gifts to individuals and flowers and treats to a range of organisations which serve our community including doctors surgeries, schools, care homes and police and fire stations.

There were a couple of things here that I thought we could reflect on.

One is a question about unseen blessings, what blessings, what abundance do we need to turn our hearts and eyes and ears too? What of God’s work do we fail to see or perhaps even take for granted?

What riches do we overlook because our senses are numbed like those inebriated guests at the wedding?

 And my second thought is, as we embark on a new year as we look to a new vision, to what extent do we make sure it’s Jesus, not the Bridegroom that gets the glory, that it’s God, not the person who brings the bag of surplus food to a door that gets the thanks?

Jesus performed signs that were much more public and risky – raising Lazarus is sure to have focused the intent of the Temple authorities to obliterate this upstart from Nazareth – how overtly do we want to point to the source of our inspiration?

It felt a real privilege on Christmas Eve to see blessings multiply, I felt so humbled to be involved in something that was clearly much greater than the sum of its parts. Where Jesus is, there is transformation, sometimes its obvious, often less so, but as disciples we get to glimpse what others, like the guests at the wedding, don’t. What do we do about that?

She closes by saying:

At the end of Chapter 20 in John’s Gospel the author writes: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” John 20:31. What signs can we be?

We are all walking billboards for Jesus. Signs of the transformation he has brought to our lives. How can we encourage others to be open to consider the difference Jesus could make to their lives? The Alpha Course starting on Wednesday is of course an opportunity to seriously consider the claims of Christ over a series of weeks - not just a ‘put you on the spot and decide moment’, but a gentle open exploration about what faith can do for your life, the transformation being in Christ can make. The course has many powerful testimonies from celebrities and ordinary people. Together with our personal stories they add up and make people open to the change Jesus can make in their lives.

 On Monday, a competition was launched to create a ‘Platinum Pudding’ to celebrate the Queen’s Platinum Jubilee later this year. Anyone is invited to submit a recipe and a photograph of a new pudding creation, (although I’m not sure Prince Andrew is invited). The winning creation will be served to the Queen and reproduced for street parties up and down the land. [[1]](#endnote-1)

The judges aren’t just looking for any old cake or trifle – they emphasize that it needs to be fit for the Queen and must look the part, a bit like the ‘showstopper’ round in Bake Off.  They are looking for something extraordinary. At the same time, however, they point out that if it is to be reproduced by people at home, it can’t have any fancy ingredients or require any specialist equipment. Everything needed to make the pudding must be very ordinary. So, there is the challenge: take some very ordinary ingredients and create something extraordinary.

In this passage from John’s gospel, we read about Jesus taking some very ordinary ingredients (water, a wedding celebration) and transforming them into something extraordinary – not only the best of wine, but an image of God’s generous hospitality.

It counters people’s preconceptions of what the life of faith is all about. Namely if you are a Christian, you are boring, judgmental, and wary of having any fun.

Twenty-one years ago on 13th January 2001 I became the minister of this church. Not many of you here now were there then. I have conducted the funerals of over seventy members of this church over those 21 years. We have lost some great souls who made a great contribution to our church life. But thanks be to God the Spirit has also been at work transforming this church, bringing new growth new challenges and new blessings. And we place our trust in God as we go forward to continue his transformation of us.

Before I was inducted, I was interviewed by the local press. The reporter, an Aston Villa fan I seem to remember, (we got talking football: I don’t want to talk about football at the moment) the reporter asked me what did I hope to do in Dursley. I instinctively replied ‘I want to have some fun’.

The headline of the article on page two of the Gazette ran ‘Minister just wants to have fun.’

The Moderator of the Synod, the nearest I have to a boss, questioned me about my attitude. I had to clarify my remarks at the induction service.

It is fun following Jesus. You never know what will happen next. You can expect the unexpected. You must remain open for miracles to happen. You can dream big and live large. You need open hearts to laugh with those who laugh and cry with those who cry. If you share Christ’s heart it will be costly. You will give and not count the cost. It will make you generous when your human nature will tend to make you fearful and protective. It will make you stand up against injustice and unrighteousness when you would rather remain seated and quiet in the corner and not get involved. It will make you exhausted because the world isn’t right, and you have signed on for Christ’s work in redeeming this mess. But it will be fun. Even when its challenging.

Mary knows this. In the story when the party runs out of wine, she turns to Jesus in expectation and perhaps a knowing wink. ‘They have no more wine’ she says.

I don’t know who you turn to when you are in need, or you see a need. Our society promotes us to be independent. We turn to ourselves. We have to get through. We have to remain strong. We have to sort our own problems out. And we can take pride in that when we do so. Well, there are some truths in that – we do need to take responsibility and do what we can.

And yet…. No man is an island, as the saying goes.

And Jesus is in the room.

‘What are we going to do? Can you help?’ It’s a simple prayer. Stumble over your own pride and ask it.

The response of Jesus to Mary is hard to read. Woman, why do you involve me?” . “My hour has not yet come.”

Translators say the word for woman does not denotate any disrespect. But we have no idea of the tone of voice of this verse. Is it that sigh you get from your children from time to time: ‘Oh mother!’ stop fussing, stop bothering me, here we go again.

Mary knows her son though. She tells the servants ‘Do whatever he tells you’. She knows that Jesus doesn’t turn down a request. She knows Jesus will help when people turn to him. She knows Jesus has a good heart.

Do you? Ready to risk something extraordinary happening in your life. Ready for some real fun, some remarkable transformation?

Let’s get the party started.



**Prayers of intercession**

Lord, we pray that your transforming power will be released,
**enabling the power of love to prevail:**into places where people live in fear of the bullet and the bomb,
where basic human rights are ignored,
where people are trafficked or treated as slaves.
As you turned water into wine, transform hatred into love.

Lord, we pray that your transforming power will be released,
**enabling the power of love to prevail:**into places where women and men are bitter because of perceived wrongs of the past,
where jobs are hard to find even when sentences have been served,
where there is no such thing as a fresh start.
As you turned water into wine, transform injury through pardon.

Lord, we pray that your transforming power will be released,
**enabling the power of love to prevail:**into situations of mistrust and insecurity,
where people do not not know who or what to believe,
where fake news is rife and lying is an acceptable norm.
As you turned water into wine, transform doubt into truth.

Lord, we pray that your transforming power will be released,
**enabling the power of love to prevail:**where people see no way of paying off their debts,
where queueing at the food bank is all the future seems to hold,
where homes or jobs seem nothing more than a distant dream.
As you turned water into wine, transform despair into hope.

Lord, we pray that your transforming power will be released,
**enabling the power of love to prevail:**to those who stroke the hands of loved ones nearing the end,
to those who wait anxiously for the phone to ring, fearing the worst,
to those who weep for loved ones now at rest.
As you turned water into wine, transform sadness into peace by your comforting presence.

Lord, we pray that your transforming power will be released,
**enabling the power of love to prevail.**Use us, Lord, to bring understanding, consolation and love,
strong in the assurance that it is in giving that we receive,
in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and in dying that we are born to eternal life.
As you turned water into wine, transform us into your disciples, agents of change in a broken world.
**Amen**.



**A sending out prayer**

May Jesus Christ,
changer of water into wine,
taker of the ordinary in our lives,
transform us for his glory,
and make us extraordinary for his sake.
Let us go out from here
with God’s miraculous grace brimming up inside us,
taking with us that abundance of love and power,
and sharing it with everyone we meet.
**Amen.**

1. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2022/117-january-february-2022-c/epiphany-2/the-week-in-focus> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)