

Sunday 19 January 2025
The Second Sunday of Epiphany

Liverpool Parish Church

2025 marks the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II, as Fr Bill reminded me earlier this month and Liverpool Parish Church will be involved in some of these commemorations. What do the stones of Liverpool Parish Church, some of which were erected in the aftermath of that war, mean to us today as we approach these commemorations? They remind us of course of an era of unprecedented levels of slaughter and destruction on the grounds of race.

You may also remember the carved figures at the entrance to the West door of Westminster Abbey of Christian martyrs from the twentieth century; they will point to slaughter on the ground of religious faith. Here we are in the 20s of a new century, and we know, if we digest the headlines, that it's not over yet. Human nature has not much changed. If you thought that the latest developments of knowledge and skill are going to free us from violence, we might do worse than remembering the stones of this parish church as other buildings in this city will do too. The spirit of murder and humiliation is still out there.

We are not to be complacent in the light of Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, and so many other places. With various political changes around the world, ahead of us lies a period of further uncertainty and further struggle and complexity, despite the news of a ceasefire in the Holy Land. And this of course prompts us to ask the question: what exactly would it mean to have healing and peace between the nations? What would it look like? We sometimes talk about reconciliation as removing an obstacle or a malfunction for healing to happen, extracting a problem away. Take for example, the Israeli government's determination to rid itself totally of Hamas as a condition for an agreement. A ceasefire was ultimately agreed with Hamas. It has not been extracted. And our readings this morning are a reminder that reconciliation and healing cannot be reduced to this kind of understanding.

The chilling words of Jesus to his mother at the Wedding in Cana, 'Woman, what is there to you and me?' remind us of the same idiom used in Mark's story of the exorcism in the synagogue, when the demons reply to Jesus, 'What is there to you and us?' There is a gulf between what Jesus brings and what even his mother expects. When Jesus heals, he often tells people: 'your faith has made you complete'. Now the healing is finished, something new has come into being. The implication here is that we have a new creation, not simply a fixing of a problem. And that is probably why at the Wedding at Cana we have a story when the fixing of a problem happens only when Jesus brings in his own gift of new wine put into new skin, to use the imagery of another gospel story from Mark.

The number of jars at Cana is significant. Numbers are frequently symbolic in the rabbinic tradition and the number six symbolizes deficiency, that which falls short. But now, the water pots are said to overflow with the superabundance of wine when the change is

affected, producing an extraordinary amount of wine – which should shock over sensitive puritanical reading of the gospel, who may have an issue with wine drinking too! There is superabundance, like with the feeding of the five thousand. Something is added, not just simply fixed.

Jesus changes water into wine. Some might have been tempted to ask, 'what did he do that for? It's a bit like the story of the crushing of the fig tree. It's a puzzling issue for many modern readers perhaps. He is offering that action to us and asking what do you make of that? Just as in other stories when Jesus makes those excluded to rejoin the community and recreate the relationships that have been severed, so now at Cana, Jesus brings a dispensation of joy that is unconfined, because his presence cannot be given measure.

The implications here are echoed with the symbolism of the messianic foretelling in our first reading from Isaiah: Jerusalem's vindication will be seen by all nations; 'you shall be called by a new name...you shall be a beautiful crown in the hand of the Lord and a royal diadem in the hand of your God'. 'Your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight'. That is where we will find dignity, freedom, and the capacity to act and to praise and to give thanks. Restoration is completed in joy and thanksgiving. When we on each Sunday come here to make Eucharist, to make thanksgiving, we are showing our own healing too – an ongoing process, no doubt a work in progress. But nonetheless, the difference has been made. There is a liberty to give thanks that has been kindled in our hearts through the gift of Christ's appearing.

Reconciliation and peace then are not about taking something away; they are about creating newness. And that newness shows itself in joy and thanksgiving. The story helps us to make sense of John's own proclamation of Jesus as the eternal Word and Wisdom – the Logos made flesh – whose appearance we celebrate at Christmas and the season of the Epiphany.

In the book of Proverbs 9: 5 and elsewhere, Wisdom is said to prepare a banquet, inviting people to eat of her bread and drink of her wine. And so, for John's Gospel, Jesus embodies God's own Wisdom and Word. He is the true bread, and the true wine. And so, though we might be despairing with complaints about current affairs nationally and internationally, let us at the start of this new year hold fast to this gift of overflowing goodness. Constant grumbling or greedy exploitation of the situation by some will make it impossible for us to be truly thankful, and for others to be thankful for you and me. When things look difficult, the response is not to panic, but to look into the depths and see the gift of God still kindled that gives us the freedom to act in gratitude and joy.

We don't build rivalry and division. St Paul urges us in his epistle this morning to remember that we have varied callings for the common good and they are all of the same Spirit. When some Christians grumble at their fate, fighting for their own space against others, they do not show the type of behaviours we are grateful for. The fruit of gratitude in the gift and

appearance of Christ is joy, love and peace, even when things are tough, especially when things are tough. Joy and gratitude are what is to be attempted. They are to be attempted because they produce a world of delight around us too.

People in their hearts long to see humanity restored to its generous essence – the divine image. And that is, against all probability, still possible. It can still be the default position. This is the duty we owe to one another as Paul says in the rest of chapter 12 of I Corinthians (we are members of one another), because this kind of behaviour produces gratitude. We become grateful to see a restored healed joyful humanity. Our own thanksgiving to God, our own generous delight in God and our own struggle to align our wills with that of Christ: ‘Do what he tells you’, responded Mary. That is what makes the world grateful. Gratefulness is the key to the freedom of our world from its current obsessions.

As we begin this new year, there is plenty to make us afraid and plenty to make us sceptical. But the Gospel is there to remind us of the essence of our calling and healing. It tells us that through this divine Epiphany, the gift has been given, and the drawer has been opened; indeed, peace has been made. It is for us to show what that peace means, to live the healed lives we struggle and seek to live, and to draw others to that.

The door of God’s heart has been flung open to us. It has been done ultimately in the Cross, which is, one could argue, the hour that Jesus points to when he says to Mary, his mother in today’s reading, ‘my hour has not yet come’. In that hour, we are born as part of a new family, and not in isolation through our folly and egoistic behaviour that isolate us and cut us off from other people and stop us from being sources of life and joy and gratitude to others. The doors of God’s mercy are flung wide. In this Epiphany, we see the life of grace, that draws joy and thanksgiving in ourselves and others.

May God give us grace to lead lives this year that will provoke thanksgiving, that will make the world joyful, not depressed or frightened. May God give us the right kind of confidence and hope and bring us to the fullness of peace, especially when we meet at the altar for every Eucharist of thanksgiving.

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