

Introduction:

On a day when my thoughts were turned towards taking my leave from this Parish, the temptation was always there to cherry-pick the readings and say what I thought. I could express my regrets, plans, hopes, and even payout, but to do that misses the point of what it means to be a Church engaged in mission.

Then I discovered the gospel was the Wedding Feast in Cana. What expectations and failures would I explore? Are you all hoping for Grange Hermitage at the end of the service, or do you view me as a failure in serving your water with the hope that the one who will come after me may have better luck with the grapes of wrath?

No, I'll continue as I have over the past few weeks of concentrating in this Epiphany tide on our baptismal promises and the need for us to prepare for the eternal banquet that is still to come. If I were to have changed one reading, it would have been the Old Testament. Still, I want the mysterious Melchizedek to remain in the story. I will add a quick peep into my alternative text for you now. I would have paired Isaiah 25 with the readings for today. In it is the prophecy to those separated from Israel in the Babylonian exile that God desires that all will be, in full time, one with him in the Wedding Banquet of the Son of Man.

Let's listen to the prophecy.

On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.
And he will destroy this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.
It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him so that he might save us.
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.
For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.

In that prophecy, initially referring to Jerusalem and the restoration of Israel, the mission of God is quite well expressed. At the end of all time, we will be one with the Lord our God, restored, forgiven and granted salvation. The signs will point to this fruition when the Son of Man, the one promised, comes to lead God's people back into the land of Promise. There will be the feast that is the Banquet of the Lamb and the sign of all that is to be restored.

Bishop Tom Wright mused on the gospel set for today rather cheekily.

Considering how many symbolic themes John has woven together here, it is remarkable that the story remains clear and powerful. Like a great Shakespearean speech, it simultaneously drives us forward and urges us to pause and ponder.

Strike each of these bells and see what echoes are set off. The third day. A wedding. More wine is needed. Now is not the time—purification pots. Glory revealed.

Weddings spoke of God's coming kingdom, as they still do in Jesus' parables and in the closing chapters of Revelation. Wine recalls the salvation feast in Isaiah 25 and the strange refreshment Melchizedek offered Abram. Jesus' 'hour' has not yet come, but the clock moves forward another minute with this action. Water tells of life, the Spirit, and new birth. Within the Jewish purification rites, and without Messianic intervention, water is available but not lifegiving; salvation is of the Jews but for the world. The last-minute new wine speaks of new creation, coming at last through the Word made flesh. And so on. In this story, at least, when the reader discovers allegorical significance, the chances are the author intended it.

I. The Wedding Feast in Cana (John 2:1-11):

II.

Many of us will recall the Doomsday Clock. Each human-originated event counts as a ticking towards the time when humanity as we know it will not be sustainable. It gained many minutes in the nuclear test age. Each war and conflict edges the hands closer to midnight. Each contribution to the decline of the natural world moves us to the end of time. It is meant to be confrontational and raise our understanding that we, as people, should be mindful of the world around us. I find the harmful use of images like this to be concerning. Some people may respond better to threats and consequences, but for me, the love of God passes all understanding that should drive change. Over the past week, as we explored the baptismal covenant we make, the positive outcomes should and must propel us.

This use of the time motif in John's gospel is essential. The hour was not now. The hour was still to come. John immediately sets the scene for the required ministry of Jesus. Indeed, our own, and the best was still to come. This first sign, the first of several, occurred in Cana in Galilee. We don't know where Cana is. It could be, looking at the call of Nathaneal, as far north as Lebanon or near Bethel. There are also good arguments to suggest it is not far from the Dead Sea, where the Essenes community were based, or as the name suggests, close to the Sea of Galilee. What is essential is that it was not on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. That hour was yet to come.

A. Baptismal Promises:

The use of the purification jars is also significant. Their use would suggest that bathing (mikveh) pools were not readily available for ritual purification. Water needed to be drawn and set aside for that use. Jesus, in transforming the water in the purification jars into wine, points to the need for our transformation towards the promised time. Picking up the allegory of our baptismal promises, there is a reminder of our transformation. Through baptism, we are cleansed, and our lives are changed. It is a commitment to follow Christ and participate in his mission. As we continue to reflect on our baptismal promises, let us renew our commitment to persevere in spreading the Good News.

II. Purification Jars:

The six stone jars, used for Jewish purification rites, are significant in this sign. Jesus chose vessels associated with ritual cleansing to emphasise the transformative power of His presence. Our journey in mission requires purification – a continuous process of spiritual growth and holiness. Through perseverance, we allow Christ to purify our intentions and actions, preparing us vessels for His use.

III. Melchizedek and the Priesthood:

A note on the Old Testament character, Melchizedek, the mysterious priest-king. Melchizedek foreshadowed Christ's priesthood. Just as Melchizedek blessed Abraham with bread and wine, Jesus, at the wedding feast, provides a richer, more fulfilling wine. This symbolism connects the Old and New Testaments, underlining the eternal and priestly nature of Christ's mission. As baptised

believers, we share in Christ's royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9) and are called to bring the richness of Christ's grace to the world.

IV. Signs within John's Gospel:

Throughout the Gospel of John, we encounter seven signs that point to the identity of Jesus. The wedding miracle is the first of these signs, revealing Jesus as the divine bridegroom who brings new life and abundance. These signs encourage us to deepen our faith and persevere in our mission, trusting in the transformative power of Christ.

Conclusion:

So, what inspiration can we take from the wedding feast at Cana? As baptised believers, we are called to persevere in our mission, embracing the transformative power of Christ in our lives. Like the purification jars, let us allow Christ to purify us for His service, remember our baptismal promises, and recognise the signs within John's gospel that affirm our faith.

Again, that call is to
Go forth into the world in peace;
be of good courage;
hold fast that which is good;
render to no one evil for evil;
strengthen the faint-hearted; support the weak;
help the afflicted;
give honour to all; love and serve the Lord,
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

My time of stewardship of this Parish may conclude. Still, the imperative that is the baptismal mission that is our common heritage most definitely continues. It is a mission that should not be driven by fear or coercion, petty squabbles and factions, historicity or patronal politics. The mission of the Parish is a mission deeply at the core of what it means to be the Body of Christ. As baptised members, this ministry must continue to grow and prosper. The time is not yet when we can be fully in the presence of the Banquet of the Lamb, raising our voices with those mentioned in the Revelation to Saint John. The mission continues until the end of times.

Like the transformative nature of water into wine, our core baptismal promises transform our lives into the fullness of grace and truth, which we behold as believers. My hour has now come, and I take my leave from this world that is the Parish of Gisborne. Your hour is still to come. You are still called to be agents of change and grace. It is my prayer that you will continue to do so gladly.

May you, as members of Christ's body, continue to bring the richness of his grace to a world in need. Amen.