

The Edge of Glory

3rd Sunday of Epiphany, 21st January 2024

Gospel Reading [John 2.1–11](#)

This New Year is as troubled as any I can remember in my lifetime, and the reasons (from extreme weather to extreme violence) we can all recite. So if you come here feeling troubled, what help might you find? Is all this just escapism, *Wonka* at prayer? Escapism is no bad thing in itself, but I hope we have more to offer than that. The gospel reading suggests that what we offer are glimpses of glory.

So what does ‘glory’ mean to you?

Imagine a glorious morning (which is all you can do this morning). Think of Vivaldi’s *Gloria*. Think of Danny Blanchflower on football: ‘The game is about glory, it is about doing things in style.’ What makes you say, like Humpty Dumpty in *Alice in Wonderland*, ‘There’s glory for you’?

Glory is a bright and shining thing. It brings delight. Back in 2011, when Lady Gaga sang *The Edge of Glory* I was surprised to discover it was inspired by her grandparents, when her grandfather was close to death after a full and fruitful life: in a moment of glory you don’t think about what you ought to do, you don’t dwell on bad things you’ve done or good things you haven’t; you embrace the moment. Glory is something bigger than you are; but get caught up in it, and it makes you a bigger person than you were before. All of which helps us to get a grip on the story of [the wedding at Cana](#).

Water into wine – could that happen? How could that happen? How can anyone turn simple H₂O into (what a scientist in my last parish assured me is) C₂H₅OH + CO₂ + other stuff (a technical term)?

This is a real question, and how you answer it will say something about how you see God and the world. You might say, ‘This is a physical miracle. It shows that Jesus is Lord of creation.’ Or, you could say, ‘No – how could it possibly be done?’

‘How?’ is an important question, but John’s gospel gives no help in answering it. He says nothing about the mechanics, because what he is interested is (another technical term) semiotics, the business of signs. If we say, ‘This story describes a miracle: how could it happen?’ the gospel says, ‘This story describes a sign: what does it point to?’ And what it points to is – glory.

On the face of it, it looks rather frivolous. Water into wine isn’t like feeding the hungry. But remember, this is at a wedding; and a wedding has the raw materials for glory.

Whatever the budget, a wedding should be a bright and shining thing. It’s a ceremony about what two people ought to do, but much more it’s about delight, the sheer joy of two people giving each other the gift of their lives through those extravagant all-or-nothing promises, ‘for better for worse...for richer for poorer’ and so on.

The Jewish prophets were struck by the extravagant character of marriage. They talked of God and Israel as husband and bride, and the Day of the Lord, when the world would be put right, as a wedding banquet awash with fine wines.

Barrels of symbolism here, because of what wine stands for. Do you need wine to survive? (Honestly, you don't.) Cana's wedding guests won't die of thirst if the bar runs dry – there's plenty of water available – but wine says that life is about more than survival, and Jesus lays on the equivalent of 768 bottles of it. Then the head waiter tastes it, and he has an M&S moment: 'This is not just *wine*...' So it's not just the quantity; what Jesus brings to the party is vintage stuff. This is not just life, but life in all its fullness.

So there's glory for you.

The task of the church is to bring us to the edge of glory. It has different ways of doing this. Take this space. Did they need to make the ceiling quite so high, the plasterwork quite so elaborate? Of course not, any more than the Cana wine needs to be quite so good or so plentiful. This space invites all who come here to go beyond the water of mere necessity and drink the wine of God's extravagance.

The building, though, is just the theatre set waiting for the cast to come onstage. We are the cast, and John's story gives us the stage directions. The catering staff *see* what Jesus does to the water, but they don't taste it. The head waiter *tastes* the wine, but doesn't see where it came from. It's both together that yield the true glory: to have the experience but not miss the meaning, you need to 'taste *and* see' as the psalm puts it (Psalm 34.8). But how?

First, be there in the first place, gathering with others in the Lord's house (here or somewhere) on the Lord's Day (or on another day if need be). Is there anything more important to do at some point in the 168 hours of our week?

So, be there – but in what frame of mind? Seeking escape, perhaps, from the world's anxieties; but also looking for signs of glory. It is a thing to ask myself each routine Sunday morning: am I going to church really looking to encounter God? If I am, then how might it happen?

Here I can be ambushed by God anywhere: in a word of scripture; in an instant of exquisite sound from voice or organ; in a prayer said or a hymn sung as if people really mean it; in the Holy Communion, which is (as Charles Wesley put it) 'furnished with mystic wine and everlasting bread'.

Such a moment brings not so much escape but blessed assurance, and a foretaste of glory. It is a sign that each of us is the object of the extravagant love of God: you, me, all those on your hearts this morning – God delights in each one of us.

If ever we catch such a glimpse of glory, it makes us bigger people than we were before, and better people too, better at facing down the anxieties of the world: more brave; more angry (when that's needed); more generous, more willing to experiment with extravagance ourselves, with the time and the money and the energy that we have - that God has been pleased to give us. In such a moment you want to give of

yourself, 'not from a sense of duty but from an overflowing of joy'. And when you do, then you have some small share in the life of God.

Notes

Danny Blanchflower

The great fallacy is that the game is first and last about winning. It is nothing of the kind. The game is about glory, it is about doing things in style. [National Football Museum](#)

The Edge of Glory Lady Gaga said of this song

['The Edge of Glory'] was about how when my grandma was standing over my grandfather while he was dying. There was this moment where I felt like he had sort of looked at her and reckoned that he had won in life. Like, 'I'm a champion. We won. Our love made us a winner.' They were married 60 years. I thought about that idea, that the glorious moment of your life is when you decide that it's okay to go, you don't have any more words to say, more business, more mountains to climb. You're on the cliff, you tip your hat to yourself and you go. That's what it was for me in that moment when I witnessed it. [Wikipedia](#)

Wine making I am indebted to the late Professor Jane Plant for this chemical guide:

C_2H_5OH is ethanol; CO_2 is carbon dioxide. Making wine usually depends on the action of yeast on the natural sugars (glucose and fructose) in grapes. It also usually involves maintaining acidity using $C_4H_5O_6$ and $C_4H_5O_5$ – tartaric acid and malic acid present in good grapes.

Not from a sense of duty... From 'Christmas Gifts', a sermon by Bishop Rowan Williams

This is what it all comes down to: all the useless, pointless beauty of our music and our ritual, our words and our acts, our struggles in prayer, all the great achievements of Christendom, every cathedral, the B Minor Mass and Rembrandt and all the rest of it...

All we can do is offer God playful gifts, the gifts of our celebration, our playing. He does not need it but he wants the hearts that will and can rejoice, gratuitously, uselessly, pointlessly and beautifully, in what he has done. It is only when we learn to give, not from a sense of duty but from an overflowing of joy, that we can have some share in the action of his redeeming and recreating love. *Open to Judgement* DLT 1994 p 30