HOMILY FOR SUNDAY ORDINARY 2 YEAR C

17 JANUARY 2016 ST BENET’S HALL

We come today to the beginning of the ‘ordinary’ Sundays of the year, in the third year of the annual cycles, the year of St Luke. But in fact we will not start readings from St Luke till next week. Today, as trailered last week by Fr Oswald, we have a last look backwards to the Christmas feast of the Epiphany.

In the Church’s liturgical tradition, the Epiphany, the revelation or manifestation of Christ, has three great signs – the coming of the wise men, the baptism of Jesus and (today’s gospel) the changing of the water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana in Galilee.

I would like just to look at some of the themes from this story of the wedding feast at Cana, simple, homely indeed though also profound. So it seems noteworthy, for example, that Jesus works this sign, this miracle, extraordinary though it is and largely beyond our experience, I should think, not out of thin air, but from what already exists, from what we already have. In this case it is from water. In other miracles too it will come from something already existing, so say a banquet from loaves and fishes. So it was too in the Old Testament, the widow at Zarephath, her son and the prophet Elijah, fed from her dwindling stock of flour and oil. God seeks to work his wonders from within the fabric of our lives.

But then these are wonders still, and extravagant ones. In the feeding of the five thousand, twelve baskets of scraps collected after. Here, in the wedding feast, when embarrassingly the wine had run out, wine is produced in 6 water jars each jar containing some thirty gallons: so about 180 gallons of wine, over a thousand bottles. Now that is quite a party. God’s generosity is extravagant.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was at this wedding feast and she plays a part in the miracle. She notices that the wine has run out and she takes an initiative as intercessor and mediator: she says to her son ‘They have no wine’ and from this the miracle comes. One can see why this gospel is set for feasts celebrating Mary’s intercession – Our Lady Help of Christians, or Our Lady of Perpetual Succour. It seems though that this intercessory path is not wholly smooth. At first Jesus seems to issue a rebuke to his mother when she points out to him that the wine has run out: ‘Woman, why turn to me? My hour has not yet come’. A cheeky son’s answer to a mother, so one might think and a confusing reference to a better time. It puts one in mind of another apparently sharp rebuke of Jesus to a foreign woman who seeks a healing and finds herself compared to a dog trying to steal scraps from the family table. That foreign woman makes a dignified riposte and so here does Mary, simply saying serenely to the servants ‘Do whatever he tells you’. It seems that we must expect the response to our petitions of intercession not always to be straightforward, sometimes to be testing, maybe even abrasive, but still the response will come and it will be effective. We must trust and be patient.

In the miracle account the steward then says to the bridegroom ‘you have kept the best wine till now’. We should be encouraged that in God’s dealings with us, the best is always yet to be. In human history and not least in our culture today, there is the opposite inclination to privilege the brief, fleeting moment of youth, with its vigour and beauty. But how quickly it goes. In God’s working in us, the best is yet to be, it is kept till last.

The last point I would like to make is the most mysterious, hardly even hinted in the passage. The bridegroom is barely mentioned and the bride not at all and this is true of other passages and parables in the gospel which use this wedding imagery. In the first reading, in the great promise of the prophet Isaiah, it is said ‘You are to be crown of splendour in the hand of your God; no longer are you to be named “Forsaken”, nor your land “Abandoned”, but you shall be called, “My delight” and your land “The Wedded”; for the Lord takes delight in you and your land will have its wedding. Like a young man marrying a virgin, so will the one who made you wed you, and as the bridegroom rejoices in his bride, so will your God rejoice in you.’

The language can seem strange, maybe even inappropriate and indeed unmanly, but it was a theme beloved of the monks, Benedictine and then especially Cistercian, in their commentaries on the Song of Songs. One of the Epiphany antiphons says of the wise men that they ‘hasten to the royal wedding and offer their gifts’ because ‘today the Church has been joined to her heavenly bridegroom’. The wedding feast to which God calls us is our own.