

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany, 17 January 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Today it is a challenge to find how the readings speak to what is at the forefront of our hearts and minds. We hear about the redemption of Israel in terms of rejoicing and marriage. We hear about Jesus attending a joyous wedding feast near his home. And we think about Haiti. Our hearts are heavy with sorrow and concern for all who have died and all who are still suffering.

How does the one speak to the other? And how does it all fit with the fact that on Monday we begin the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity?

First of all, throughout Scripture we find feasting and rejoicing. That God's wish for his people is joy and abundance is everywhere apparent. The primary image we have of the larger life with God beyond death is of a great feast, crowded with joyful guests. God invites us to joy, whether we deserve it or not. (Think of the Prodigal Son.)

And yet in our daily experience we see incredible suffering. We have friends and family who are ill or dying. People are losing their jobs and their homes and their marriages. – And Port-au-Prince is a heap of rubble, filled with the dead, the dying, the starving, the wounded, and the grieving.

How do we put those ideas together?

If we were in Haiti right now, the first lines to come to mind would probably not be "How priceless is your love, O God! your people take refuge under the shadow of your wings. They feast upon the abundance of your house; you give them drink from the river of your delights." And yet we know that we all take refuge under the shadow of God's wings, because the God does delight in us.

But that seems so abstract and otherworldly in the face of all this real world suffering, in the face of lines like these from an Episcopal priest in Haiti.

"There is no Cathedral. The entire Holy Trinity complex is gone. The convent for the Sisters of St. Margaret is gone. The Bishop's house is gone. College St. Pierre is gone."

There was widespread suffering in Jesus' own time, and he was often in the midst of it. But his first public sign, his first exercise of ministry so that people could recognize him, was at a wedding. We do not see him involved with the couple or the prayers, but in the context of the party. Here is Immanuel, God-with-us, making sure that the celebration is joyful, so that the community can come together. Jesus makes it possible for the party to continue without an upset. He does not preach; he makes wine.

Whom Jesus chooses to help him is also a surprise. Jesus rallies not the important people, nor his followers, nor the bride and groom, but the servants, the ones that most people ignore. He gets them to draw water, the simplest of commodities – and with his blessing the water becomes wine for celebrating. And no one sees what has happened except the servants.

We are the servants, the ones who are called to bring our simple gifts, our water, to Jesus so that they can be blessed and transformed, and everyone can celebrate.

Throughout scripture we find feasting as the appropriate response to God. This is what God wants for us. We are told over and over that God's generosity far surpasses anything we can imagine, or would deem appropriate.

In the face of situations like the disaster in Haiti, we feel helpless. The need is so great and our resources seem so small. Our instinct to help is right and good.

As Paul says, we have all been given gifts. Some of us have great wealth. Some of us have organizational talent. Some of us are artists. Some of us have the gift of inspiring others. Some of us have the gift of constant prayer. The gifts are as varied as we are, but all are given 'for the common good.' So how does that work?

It is God's will to extravagantly bless all people. If, as we believe, we are God's hands and feet in the world, it is with our gifts that the extravagant blessing occurs. In today's gospel story, we are the servants, the ones Mary tells, "Do anything he tells you." So we fill our water jars, not seeing how this will be in any way helpful to the problem. (I am sure the servants thought Jesus was being a bit odd when he asked for all that water.) But we do it – we fill those water jars. And we see our small efforts, our water jars, turned into the best wine anyone has ever tasted – into blessings for everyone at the party. The gathered community is able to continue their celebration. Only the servants know what happened to make that possible. That is one of the delights of being part of the community of God's servants, to see God using our small gifts to do truly marvelous things.

Whatever we have to give, though it seem like ordinary water to us, becomes the wine of rejoicing when offered in the Name of God. Clean water is of course one of the things most desperately needed after an earthquake – so in this case the miracle could come in the form of money transformed into pure water.

Similar transformations happen when prayer and love are transformed into efficient organization to get the water to the parched people, when combat troops are transformed into compassionate caregivers, when a soccer stadium or a neighborhood park is transformed into a hospital. What we have to give through the grace of God becomes what the people need.

God's love for his creatures knows no boundaries – and when we allow that love to move us we become the servants who make the feast possible. It is hard to imagine a feast in Haiti right now, just as it would have been hard in the beleaguered Israel of Isaiah's time. But our hearts are moved by all the suffering.

God's will for the people of Haiti is joy and fullness of life. God's will for the rest of the world is that we help to bring joy to Haiti and everywhere there is suffering. Compassion is important, taking the pain of the victims into our own hearts, as God does. But equally important is an active response.

The Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity helps us find our way to that response. Throughout the history of the Church, from its earliest days, we see theologians arguing, people with power and authority jousting with one another over primacy. Those who are united are those who serve. The Ecumenical movement began among the missionaries serving the suffering around the world. In recent years of dispute and recrimination among bishops, the annual gathering of Anglican women proclaimed that they would not allow the ties that have bound them together in mutual service and love to be broken, no matter what the bishops decreed.

Last year in England the Anglican primates proclaimed the Millennium Development Goals, the ending of world poverty, to be much more important than any disputes dividing them. We are united in service and prayer. We remember that when we are confronted by the devastation in Haiti.

The Diocese of Haiti is a diocese of our Episcopal Church, so we already are united with them. It includes the whole tiny country – and has more members than any other diocese in our church. These are active Christians in service to the country and its people. They have very little money, but have created all manner of schools and medical institutions. Now most of their buildings are gone. Many of their people have lost their lives. But they do not lose hope, because their relationship with the one who cared enough to provide wine for the wedding feast is with them to strengthen them.

Our hearts go out to the people of Haiti, the dead and the living. It is time to 'do whatever he tells us', to see what we have in our water jars. Many of us have already donated to Episcopal Relief and Development where the money will go directly through the church already there, or to Habitat for Humanity, or to the Red Cross, or to any one of the other agencies rallying to provide needed aid.

What else is Jesus calling forth in you?

Are you one of our parish's many gifted pray-ers? You can join Christians all over the world in prayer for the unity Christ called us to, especially this week. You can lift up the victims and the hard-working helpers in prayer.

Are you a gifted writer? You describe the reality in ways that give hope.

Are you a teacher? You can help children recognize ways that they can contribute and not feel helpless.

Are you persuasive? You can rally others to help in any way they can.

Look at your own god-given gifts and then listen to God's voice in your heart.

However small our gifts may seem to us, however small the drops of water, we know that God can bless them, turn them into the wine of rejoicing for the world.