

It is interesting that the first recorded sign of Jesus' power was not the healing of a leper, or some other sick person; not the forgiveness of sins; nor some gift bestowed in response to faith. It was a comparatively mundane act. It was the provision of extra wine for the guests at a marriage feast, as we heard in St John's Gospel (2.1-11). Within a few minutes of arriving in church to be married, the bride and groom hear the words: "Which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence, and first miracle that he wrought, in Cana of Galilee".

Whilst we may have some questions about the actual details of the story and the practicalities of the miracle, let us concentrate on the significance of the event without worrying too much about the literal details. This was no gloomy or serious religious occasion. For the marriage ceremony was over and the party was now in full swing. Jesus was sharing in this very human situation, the gaiety and merriment of the wedding celebrations. Jesus later likened the kingdom of God to the 'joy of a wedding' (Matthew 22). Where Jesus Christ is, there must be life, and light: and laughter! If there is none, he will make it. That is what he did at Cana. This is why the situation is so significant. It was the first indication of what God's presence means.

Now some people do not like this reminder. They even fear it; for they do not want a religion that brings joy, freedom and laughter. For them, religion is a serious matter and one must not laugh in the presence of God. One lady actually apologised for laughing out loud at one of my jokes! We can smile, so long as it is discreet, but never laugh! We must conform to the old conventions. The Pharisees thought like this, and much of the teaching of the church throughout the ages has encouraged this train of thought. But we do not get this teaching from Jesus: far from it. Of course religion is a serious business, and at times utter solemnity is most appropriate and essential. Indeed, the title of the marriage service in the Book of Common Prayer is the "Solemnisation of Matrimony". But this is not the same as being miserable – at least, not until after the wedding day! Also there are times when fear and foreboding are most appropriate in religion, but not all the time. It is possible to be serious and yet at the same time to be joyful; or happy.

I find the modern approach of preachers who feel they must start their sermon with a corny juvenile joke rather tedious and irritating but - take laughter out of the House of God and what you have is a cold, cheerless building that frightens away those who hesitantly cross its threshold for the first time. Lots of people think that monasteries and nunneries are like that. But they have not visited many. I have, and one has only to be in these places for a few minutes and talk to the monks or nuns, to realise how false is this impression. The newspaper cartoons depicting jolly, rotund, monks with a sense of humour are much nearer to the truth.

Why is it that so many have been slow to grasp the truth that Jesus presented the kingdom of God as a happy experience? When it is not happy, and buoyant and smiling, something has gone wrong. It is the devil that takes away laughter, and it is Jesus who gives it. Where we find deep and true happiness, there must be God's rule in the hearts of men and women. Selfish pleasure of the

moment, which is often gained at the expense of someone else, is not to be encouraged. Also we are not thinking of the false shallowness of laughter that can light one up for a moment, but has no lasting foundation. But rather we mean simple, sheer joy, the kind of joy that acknowledges that God is part of normal everyday life. For true happiness is infectious and brightens the lives of all who come into contact with it.

Speaking personally for a moment, I do believe that it has been part of my mission to dispel the 'Misery Martin' approach to life in general and to the church in particular. It is significant that a woman once complained to me saying: "Why do you always look on the bright side of things?" It is certainly a justified comment for my glass is always half-full, never half-empty – unless you are paying! Treating problems lightly does not mean ignoring their seriousness, nor does it always reduce pain: but it certainly makes it easier to cope with them. It somehow creates a happiness of the soul that swamps the gloom of the spirit. Whilst people who are endlessly bright and cheerful all the time can be terribly boring and exhausting, magnifying a problem or endlessly discussing it, never helps to remove it. This surely is the meaning of Christianity. The secondary results may well bring episodes of sadness, of pain, and hardship. But the prime result and the end product must be enlightenment, freedom, peace and joy. A Christian, who makes their religious beliefs an excuse for bringing pain or misery to their relatives and neighbours, is not a *real* Christian. This is why so many crack-pot cults are positively dangerous.

With the wine at the wedding feast in Cana, Jesus brought joy into the hearts of men and women. As St John tells us (2.11): by the wine at the wedding feast, Jesus Christ 'manifested his glory'. This is highlighted very clearly in the service of Holy Communion. Here we receive the wine in remembrance that Christ shed his blood for you and me. As you think of him on the Cross at that time, you may think of it sadly, and rightly so. Yet we must also remember that with the wine, we at the same time remember his "glorious ascension into heaven, and we look for the coming of his kingdom". Remember that and you will "feed on him in your heart by faith with thanksgiving".

One further point: knowing the problem of alcoholism as we sadly do, we certainly would not advocate anyone drinking wine as a form of escapism from the world. But it is also wrong for some to suggest, that the drinking of any alcohol is contrary to God's will for mankind. Like all God's gifts, it should be used responsibly at the right time and in the right way. For as the Psalmist (104.15) said all those centuries ago: "wine ... maketh glad the heart of man". Jesus died, not to make us sad, but to make us happy and glad. This is an important point of the story of the episode at Cana. For this was the Epiphany of our Lord and Saviour.