

Epiphany 2
17/1/2016

Mark the Evangelist

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Psalm 36

John 2:1-11

Epiphany at Corinth and Cana

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

Epiphany for a second Sunday – Epiphany, literally a ‘shining around’, or - as the visit of the Magi suggests - a truly ‘magi-cal’ time: the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.

Fifty years have passed since I first attempted a sermon on the Cana text.

Then and now could hardly be more of contrast. Then I was a temporary replacement for a senior minister for a three month period on leave in a flourishing eastern suburban congregation - three services a Sunday in the same place, a total assembly perhaps of 500 souls - and bodies.

This disclosure is not intended to be a nostalgic indulgence – well it is actually! But more seriously, 50 years ago it appeared that the mission to the Gentiles had wondrously, indeed we might say, ‘magi-cally’ succeeded. Epiphany could be taken for granted as an accomplished reality in our day.

The question is now much more sharply focussed – what does epiphany mean for a culture rejoicing in its newly discovered buzz word: ‘secularity’, as it fun runs its way to the charity of its choice?

But epiphany should never have been taken for granted - if our two texts today are allowed to inform us. There has never been a time when the gospel has not been contested. In this respect, Cana and Corinth, Gospel and Epistle are two of a kind. As “*A Tale of Two Cities*”, they come to us freighted with significance; rich venues indeed for an epiphany.

One of our sad legacies of a century or so of serious biblical neglect is the insufficient attention given to its topography. As if the texts’ naming of cities was of no real consequence, this neglect accompanied a resolute determination to read Scripture as having no complex cultural and religious setting, that is, as if it could simply be plumbed for its “face value” as a book of precedents more, or usually less, of contemporary relevance.

So, this morning, first Corinth – then as multicultural as is today’s Melbourne, a veritable playground for excess of body, mind and spirit. We take this apparently throwaway line of Paul’s, for example:

“No-one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says: “Let Jesus be cursed”... Two millennia later when Christian faith is increasingly under attack, we might readily assume that here is where it begins: the same story as ours – culture against Christ. But no – this is vintage Corinth – the radical separation of spirit from body. For note: the cry was ‘Jesus be cursed’ not ‘Jesus Christ be cursed’. That is, the Corinthian Christians were so intoxicated by their spiritual pursuits, that they assumed that they no longer needed the enfleshed, incarnate, bodily Jesus. They had kicked that ladder away in their

ascent to spiritual heights – they had the risen Christ as either their attainment or their goal. So with the cry: ‘Jesus be cursed’ we are in truth being inducted into the very mindset not only of Corinthian culture, but of the Corinthian congregation itself. Here religious self-centredness abounded – every soul pursuing its own path to enlightenment. This is why the whole of Chapter 12 of Paul’s letter is given over to an exposition of spiritual gifts – over and over again he insists given not by “human spirit”, but by Holy Spirit; not self-generated, but given by the *Spirit of God* for the sake of the Church; not for individual self-absorption, but for the building up of the bodily life of the congregation.

So much for Corinth - or indeed contemporary Melbourne. Whenever spirit and body are separated disaster looms. So today: ‘*I’m not religious, I’m into spirituality*’. But now, consider the irony of a present obverse separation much closer to home. Those who call themselves ‘progressive’, or recently and perhaps even more alarmingly, ‘evolving’ Christians have no time for the post-crucified Christ pursued by the Corinthians. Rather, refusing to acknowledge that if Christian belief is not tied to the truth that the life and death of Jesus is an event in God or it is nothing worth bothering with, that only a ‘teaching’ Jesus is permitted – then we have a refusal to climb any ladder at all. To adopt Paul’s language, what we have here is effectively not only “Jesus hooray”, but the much more shocking: “Christ be cursed”.

And so to Cana where the news is much the same. To get there, we need to underline yet again a basic fact, which Christmas invariably suppresses, and of which our culture is totally ignorant – that the letters of Paul chronologically precede the Gospels. In this case, with the gospel of John before us, we are looking at a period of 60 years between the time of the life of Jesus and the composition of our text. Some of us were not born sixty years ago – many of us were barely out of our teens. Imagine trying to remember a word for word conversation so long ago.

A few facts then. Like Corinth, Cana of Galilee entertained many popular cults. Some towns like Capernaum were primarily Jewish, others like Sepphoris were primarily Gentile, hosting shrines to numerous deities. In this complex society, the purpose of the gospel was essentially to force a decision on Jewish Christians in Galilee who were concealing their faith in order to avoid expulsion from the synagogue. Hence the purpose of the gospel is to demonstrate Christ’s coming into the world to bring about a genuine crisis – a fundamental choice between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, life and death. In a word, the old order is to be replaced by the new. This is what the conversion of water into wine symbolises. In this, the real, final, epiphany for John - as for Paul - is the scandal of the cross, the cost of discipleship, the time when “my hour has not yet come” now properly arrives.

In essence then, this gospel is designed as a missionary tract to convert Greek speaking Jews to Christianity in a day when Christians had been expelled from the Jewish synagogue. This why all the controversies reported in this Galilean setting of the Gospel revolve around the true observance of the law, illustrating the pivotal text of the first chapter of the Gospel, namely, that ‘*the law was given by Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ*’.

So a moment or two on the Cana text - the first and fundamental of the six signs of the gospel culminating in the seventh, Easter day. The primacy given to Cana is driven home throughout by playing with numbers. Seven is the biblical number for completion, and three for the number of God. This is why we are told that it all happens at a wedding at Cana ‘on the third day’, that is, a matrimonial celebration of a new

beginning here ,retrospectively, foreshadows a much more primary new beginning of life – that soon to be inaugurated by the Cross.

But one more number is of equal significance, the six stone water jars. Just as for the opening chapter of Genesis, where God moves and rules over the waters, so here it is no accident that John portrays the first sign of Jesus as power over water in the six jars, remembering that six is the biblical number for humanity, coming into existence as we do on the sixth day. The meaning is clear: God and the world, that is, secular creation and new creation, must never be separated.

But there is yet more, layer upon layer. We are explicitly told first up that *‘The mother of Jesus was there’*. We need to be told this because Mary is the representative of the old order as the one who literally gives birth to the new. Hence the significance of her words *‘they have no wine’*, after, as it were, the poorer Dan Murphy special gives out. Only now is it clear what otherwise looks like a pretty rude son: *“Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? Rude, because, as Jesus must say: ‘My hour has not yet come’*. Immediately Mary gets the point. She instructs the servants: *‘Do whatever he tells you.’* In other words, the new best wine, kept to the last, can only be given legitimacy by the ‘old’ order.

There is so much more, but our time has gone. This morning we have before us epiphany for Corinth and Cana when ‘religion’ was everywhere.

How is that epiphany to be appreciated by us after two thousand years of an enculturated gospel, now transmuted into a world of no law, no taboos, no restraints? Our texts will not permit us to go back, only forward to appropriate the mature freedom of the wine of the gospel. We need no convincing that the world, as always, is in turmoil, but always expressing its predicament in new forms. Our primary question today surely is this: What are the pressures on an eroded departed Christendom, except the law masquerading as freedom, water we are everywhere being coerced into believing that is really wine.

Whatever be our response, this much is at least true. That we are called to drink for ourselves the new wine of the life of God with the sensitivity of the connoisseur, in a lively hope that others may discover in our day that the best wine has indeed been kept till last. To this tasting, and its energising renewal around this table, we now give ourselves once again.
