

Homily for The Second Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C (2010)

*Wherever the Catholic sun doth shine,
There's always laughter and good red wine.
At least I've always found it so.
Benedicamus Domino!*

Hilaire Belloc knew a thing or two about Catholic faith and life, and I'm sure he shared the odd glass of good red wine with his friends here in this parish. This rather encouraging little verse picks up on something that goes to the heart of our faith, because our faith is essentially a faith of celebration. Whatever caricatures people may like to paint of us, Catholicism is not primarily about a long face and an unhappy life, it is fundamentally about celebrating the great and wonderful gifts of God. It starts of with a great and enthusiastic Yes! It only says no to those things that stop us really celebrating, to all the little things that get in the way of the one big thing that fills our lives with joy and delight. Furthermore, there is something about wine which makes it rather a powerful symbol. Wine, of course, is alcoholic and it can make us drunk, but no-one drinks wine to primarily get drunk - there are much easier ways of doing it than that. In addition, few of us drink a bottle of wine alone in a sitting, so there is something about wine that is about sharing, and community, and being with friends. We do not need to drink wine, we could survive quite happily if all we ever drank was water, but for most people wine just makes life better. It is, to some extent, a natural symbol: it speaks of celebration, of making life better than the bare minimum, of society and friendship.

It is no coincidence that this story is about water changed into wine. All sorts of other miracles could have been performed, but everything about this one is significant, including especially the presence of the wine.

This first of Jesus' signs, the first time that anyone sees him in all his glory since the visit of the wise men all those years before and his more recent baptism in the Jordan, takes place at a wedding. In some ways, of course, this would have been quite like the

weddings of today, but in other ways it was very different. People lived much closer together, this would have been a village event because everyone in the village would have known the couple or been related to them; the celebrations would have lasted for some days. A community has gathered to celebrate the love of a man and a woman, but also to celebrate that community's regeneration, the hope and promise that it will be carried on into the next generation. This is a celebration filled with hope and excitement, not just for the couple, but also for the whole local community. If the wedding goes well, the village is happy; if something goes wrong not just the couple, but the whole village is left feeling uneasy and unsettled. It is this need that Mary sees, and which she steps in to sort out.

This story gives a wonderful picture of Mary. She is celebrating with her friends, but she is all the same a very practical person who is able to see what is lacking, and she knows where to turn to resolve it. She is anxious that the problem should be solved without fuss, without drawing attention to it, and certainly without her looking for any credit. She sees what is lacking, what obstacle there is to this young couple's happiness, what potentially lies between this community and the joyful hope of a bright future. In this story we can see a glimpse of Mary's eternal destiny, because she always remains in heaven the same practical person that she was on earth. Still she sees what is lacking in our lives, still she carries our needs and our inadequacies to the heart of her Son. She sees where our lives are empty, where our hope, or our faith, or our love have run dry, and she brings us to the Lord. She is so often the way to Jesus, and she stands us in front of him, empty and perhaps a little ashamed, and says to us 'Do whatever he tells you'.

Then again, there is the means by which Jesus solves the problem. There is no wine, but there is plenty of water. There is plenty of ordinary, everyday water, not even water that was meant for drinking, water that was there for washing. It is this very mundane stuff that Jesus chooses as the raw material to create the wine of celebration. Jesus takes something very ordinary - not only is it the wrong sort of drink, it isn't even drink at all, and he makes it into something extraordinary. Once again, this is more than mere practicality. There is in this a deep symbolism, because it speaks clearly of the fact that God can take what is ordinary and mundane, and make it rather extraordinary. God has the power to transform. Those of us who try to serve the

Church as priests take a great deal of comfort from this passage. We are well aware of our failings and our shortcomings, we are well aware that we are not any better as people than anybody else; we are well aware that we are not, on our own, 'good' at what we need to do. However God is able to take what is ordinary and make it extraordinary; he is able to take ordinary people and give us the extraordinary power to make his Son present on the altar, to set people free from their sins, and so on. However mundane and ordinary our lives may seem, God has the power to take them and to transform them into something beautiful. Whatever we do, if we offer it freely and gladly to God, becomes beautiful.

Then there is the wine, the place where we began. In the scriptures wine is very significant, very symbolic. It speaks to us of God's blessing, his presence, which is powerful, intoxicating and full of life. When the apostles first received the Spirit on Pentecost Day, when their lives were first filled with the great power of God, the bystanders laughed at them and said 'They have been drinking too much new wine' (Acts 2.13). Isaiah spoke of Israel as the Lord's vineyard (Chapter 5) and Jeremiah talked of it as a choice vine (chapter 2). The scriptures are full of this idea that I began with that wine is something special, something communal, something celebratory, something enriching, something more than the basic necessity. It is a powerful reminder of God's power, God's life. This story is saying to us through its powerful symbolism, that where there is something lacking, where hope and joy are at risk of disappearing, Jesus can act. Today we are invited to this wedding feast. We are invited to take our place at table, and to celebrate with Mary, and Jesus, and the disciples. As the bread and wine are brought to the altar, we are invited to bring, too, our everyday lives, no matter how humdrum and ordinary they may seem, and to offer them up for transformation. Where hope is lacking, where joy is tarnished, where faith is weak, we offer these watery gifts, asking that they be made into new wine, good wine, strong wine. Come to the banquet, come to the party, eat and drink and celebrate, for the Lord is alive, and he is powerful, and he wants to renew us and fill us with his life.