

Sunday 16th January – Transformation

Isaiah 62:1-5

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

John 2:1-11

Why does it have to be like this?

We might say those words about the state of the world what with the climate crisis, the growing number of refugees around the world and of course the Covid pandemic. We might say those words about the state of the country – with inequalities, rising prices and a looming crisis in the health and social care systems. We might say them about our own lives – financial pressures, health issues or maybe family rifts. We might even say them about the church. Why can't there be more children and young people; why are so many people not interested in church?

Why does it have to be like this?

In our Old Testament reading this morning, the prophet Isaiah was writing to the Jewish exiles in Babylon and recognised their feelings of desolation and abandonment. Where was God when they needed him – did He care for them any more? Was he even aware of their plight? How were they supposed to cope with all this on their own? Why did it have to be like it was?

And in his prophecy we have some wonderfully encouraging words.

*You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;
but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,
and your land Married;
for the Lord delights in you,
and your land shall be married.*

There is hope; God has not forgotten you; you are important; you are not seeing the whole truth about yourselves or your situation. Things will change.

Isaiah is essentially saying that God is a god who deals in transformations. He helps us see things from a new perspective, from a new position. He helps us

to see a greater truth about reality, about who we are and what we are capable of. And he helps us bring that about - note that - he helps us, he doesn't do it all for us. By his power working within us he transforms the ordinary. He doesn't throw it away and start again, he transforms it.

We can see a similar theme in the story which was our gospel reading. The story of a wedding. The story of a wedding that went wrong – the wine had run out. Now Jewish weddings celebrations were lengthy affairs – lasting perhaps for as long as a week - so it's easy to see how this might have happened. But this wasn't simply an inconvenience; it was a social disaster. There would be shame to live with for many a year; and the bride and groom would see it as foretelling bad luck on their future married life. They might well have been saying "why does it have to be like this?"

So, at his mother's request, Jesus acts and turns ordinary water into wine. Not just wine, but choice wine. The best wine. So this is a story about how ordinary water can be transformed into something extraordinary by the God who deals in transformation.

But this is of course not just a story of water being changed to wine. It points to something deeper and more profound. It's one of seven signs in John's gospel that do this. We looked at them round about this time last year in our midweek reflections (you can look at what we said again – all of the reflections are on the website). John describes this as the first of the signs that revealed Jesus' glory. He sees the event as looking forward to Jesus's death and therefore his resurrection; pointing to the saving work of Jesus and anticipating the final heavenly banquet to which we are all invited because of what Jesus did. As such we can clearly see how it illustrates his glory.

John is saying that this is a sign of the transformation that can take place in all of our lives – from ordinary to extraordinary. To fullness of life; life in abundance. Salvation. Brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We might then think it's all about the long term – whether we shall inherit eternal life. But it's also a sign of transformations that can take place now in our daily lives, to bring fullness of life into the present as well as the future. Because the message for us today is that God has the power to transform our lives.

To transform our weaknesses into his strengths. To turn our Monday mornings when we feel depressed and downhearted into days full of joy and celebration. To turn our feelings of abandonment into knowledge of being loved. To take the “why does it have to be like this?” question and turn it on its head.

The God of transformation can take our gifts and abilities, our possessions and passions, our thoughts and deeds and transform them into something special for him. Helping us to achieve more than we ever hoped or dreamed. Helping us in our turn to bring transformation to others.

So how can this happen?

In his letter to the Corinthians that was read as the second reading Paul talks about the power of the Holy Spirit, and in particular about the gifts of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is no more and no less than God’s presence with us. His life in our lives; his breath as our breath; his power within us.

And it’s this presence of God, this power of God, within us that can bring about the transformation that starts with us and flows out into the world around us. The gifts mentioned here are some ways in which the spirit brings about such transformation. Wisdom, knowledge, healing, prophecy, tongues. Elsewhere Paul talks of encouragement, teaching, generosity and service. Gifts that help us to change the “why does it have to be like this” question to a “things can and will be different” statement. Gifts that enable us to be part of the transformation process.

We might think that we have nothing to offer; that others are far more gifted and talented than we are; that anything we can do will have little or no effect. But think back again to the story of the wedding. What could be more ordinary than water sitting in stone jars. Water. Common, everyday water. And yet the miracle in the story was that the ordinary, the everyday, the mundane even, the water was transformed into something far beyond people’s expectations; far beyond what they ever dreamt might be possible. Not just good wine but the very best wine.

So let us offer ourselves, our ordinary everyday selves. Our worries and concerns; our fears as well as our hopes. Let’s offer our whole selves to God in faith that through his presence within us, through his Spirit he will transform us so that we can be part of the transformation of the church, the area, the nation and the world.