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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : January 24th, 2021
“The Third Sunday of Epiphany”

EPIPHANY, 3 2021

“There’s going to be a wedding in the family” – how often has that phrase announced a happy event? These days we tend to get lots of notice of a wedding, partly because there is pressure on couples to book the right venues and they often have to set the date many months ahead. Even in my family, which is quite small, this happens – this year two of my nephews hope to get married and another one of my 8 god-children plans to tie the knot! I particularly enjoy my ministry of helping a couple to plan their day – and every marriage is quite different, as each couple wants to stamp their own individual mark on their day.

Amongst some weddings I have been involved in, one couple went for the speeches before the meal, another couple enjoyed a barn dance in a marquee and the guests at another wedding sat down to a simple Devon cream tea. Of course, the pandemic has turned everything upside down and many couples are now opting for a smaller ceremony to comply with the ever-changing regulations – and then promising to have a bigger celebration one day. But in whatever way they go about it, the principle is the same. A marriage celebrates the beginning of a changed, new life. The couple show how their love for one another has brought them to marriage and their wedding day emphasises the important step they are taking. In many cultures there is a symbolic change of name to signify that there has been a fundamental life change and that the two are now one. In a similar way (as we thought about the other Sunday when we were celebrating the baptism of Christ) God first loves us and chooses us, and then calls us by name to a changed life in him that is often referred to as being born again into a new life. Small wonder that both baptism and marriage are two of the most significant of the seven sacraments – not least because they are the only two explicitly referred to in the Bible.

Today's Gospel reading is all about change – of water being changed into wine. Of course, this happens every year as the rain falls and gets drawn into the vine to make the grape juice, and then the grape juice is fermented carefully to make that new drink – wine. But what was different in the small town of Cana was that the change happened straight away. The ordinary is turned into the remarkable through contact with and obedience to God. But look more closely for a moment at Mary's role in the story. Mary has nurtured Jesus and knows him better than anyone else. She has bore him, nursed him, even received the visitors who arrived with their strange gifts for him; she has heard prophecies spoken over him and watched him grow in self awareness. Above all, Mary has 'treasured up all these things in her heart'. Now she sees that things have changed, that he has been publicly recognised by John through baptism as we celebrated two Sundays ago and that he is beginning to gather his disciples together as we celebrated last Sunday.

Mary sees and seems to understand. So, she gently forces nothing but encourages the servants to respond to her son – in the same way that she has responded to God. "Do whatever he tells you" she tells them.

So maybe we in another different way are being called to 'do whatever he tells us'. There are many prayers and hymns which encourage us to dedicate, commit our lives more fully to Christ and his call. One of my favourites is the hymn we sang at the start of the service this morning – 'O thou who camest from above'. It recognises our need for God's Holy Spirit to come upon us in all we seek to do. Charles Wesley took his theme from Leviticus 6: 13 which reads 'the fire shall ever be burning upon the altar: it shall never go out'. In this hymn we have the flame, the altar, the inextinguishable blaze, the holy fire, and that most satisfying ending, 'make my sacrifice complete' – a hymn that celebrates and encourages the warm and wholehearted devotion of the Christian. Of course, the words of the hymn also needed a warm tune. That had to wait for a hundred years until the author's grandson, S.S. Wesley, the leading cathedral musician of his day, published this tune called Hereford. It got its name because he had been organist of Hereford Cathedral between 1832 and 1835 at the beginning of his career – a place where I was to be ordained many years later.

Essentially, it is a lovely prayer of personal dedication and commitment which calls on each of us to kindle a flame of sacred love so that it may burn for the glory of God and that we can turn to Jesus to confirm our heart's desire to work, and speak and think for him – and to do that until our life ends. May it be so for each of us. Amen.