

# Water into Wine ...

## *... Generosity without measure*

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*A sermon given on the Third Sunday of Epiphany, 21st January 2024 by Canon David Grant, Parish Priest of St John of Beverley, in Beverley Minster*

*Genesis 14:17-20; John 2:1-11*

The liturgy today presents us with a very familiar story, the first and perhaps best known of all Our Lord's miracles. It also gives us a shadowy, mysterious figure, Melchizedek, who appears once in Genesis, then gets a mention in Psalm 110, and then once again in the letter to the Hebrews. He appears out of the blue to bless Abram (he's not yet Abraham; he's not yet received the fullness of God's promise.) And this mysterious figure gives Abram a symbolic gift of bread and wine; in return, Abram gives Melchizedek a 10th of the spoil he had just won in battle. Melchizedek is clearly a personage of power, a kingly priest who rules over the city of Salem, which many centuries later would be taken by King David in his war of expansion and become a Jewish city.

Now, one doesn't give tribute to an inferior, and the fact that Melchizedek's ancestry or death are not mentioned are seen by later scholars as a figure (not a reality, of course) of an eternal priesthood. In Psalm 110, the Psalmist tells us, 'The Lord has made a solemn promise and will not take it back. You will be a priest forever in the line of succession to Melchizedek.' We can see how this would be seen as referring to Jesus after his resurrection, where he sits at the right hand of the Father. So in the letter to the Hebrews the verse, 'You will be a priest forever in line of succession to Melchizedek', originally addressed to this priest-king of Salem, is understood to refer to Christ's priesthood. Christ's priesthood is not that of Aaron, which in effect came to an end when the Romans destroyed the temple in AD 70. The priesthood of the new covenant is not constrained by human frailty or the randomness of history: Christ is the eternal priest prefigured by Melchizedek. The letter to the Hebrews further argues that because Melchizedek blesses Abram and in return receives tribute, then his priesthood must be superior to that of Aaron and all the other priests of the old dispensation. So by this albeit slightly involved explanation, in the first reading we are celebrating the priesthood of Our Lord, a radically new understanding of priesthood, replacing that which went before - something radically new.

This is exactly what we see in John's account of Jesus' first miracle, or as John would prefer, 'sign'. The story is full of riches. Yes, a young couple are saved from an embarrassing incident at their wedding, but it points to another wedding, the final wedding feast of God and his people so often alluded to throughout the scriptures. Furthermore, in Jewish thought, water represents the law: in an arid land, water is a sign of life and is precious; just as the Torah, the law of God given to Moses on Sinai for his people, is likewise precious and gives life.

Jesus transforms this water of the law into the wine of the new covenant and in amazingly generous quantities. John speaks of what in our measurements would be approximately 120 gallons of wine - the time of the Messiah has well and truly come. And the gradual manifestation of Jesus's eternal glory throughout his ministry will culminate in the greatest 'sign' of all - his sacrifice on the altar of the cross, where he is both priest and lamb of sacrifice; bread of sustenance and wine of joy.

I think there is another great truth revealed here. Jesus, at the beginning of his mission, together with his blessed mother and the disciples, is at a wedding. And hopefully families are the result of marriage which begins with a wedding. Undoubtedly Cana is pointing to the great wedding feast of heaven, but also the Lord wishes to make clear the truth to what extent the family is part of God's revelation and the history of salvation. Melchizedek blesses with the staples of life, bread and wine; Jesus blesses with wine, which will come to symbolise his blood shed for our salvation.

By virtue of our baptism, we share in that one common priesthood foreshadowed by Melchizedek and made living reality in Jesus. And where do we minister that priesthood? First and foremost in what we might call the 'domestic' church, that community from which all other communities worthy of the name takes their inspiration, namely the family.

Now, I've been a priest for over 40 years in various parishes up and down Yorkshire, so I am not unaware of the problems that families face or the truism that all families can be described at times as being somewhat dysfunctional. But it is there where we learn to minister to one another, to make sacrifices for one another, and please God, with the help of his grace to be Christ-like to one another.

If we rely on our own efforts alone, we will most certainly fail. But the God who blessed Abram through Melchizedek (and began to show us our destiny can be in the first great sign given by his incarnate son at Cana) will be with us. And as we have heard just now in his Holy Word - His generosity is without measure.

# Reading Texts

## Genesis 14:17-20

<sup>17</sup> After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). <sup>18</sup> And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. <sup>19</sup> He blessed him and said, 'Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; <sup>20</sup> and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!' And Abram gave him one-tenth of everything.

## John 2.1-11

<sup>1</sup> On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. <sup>2</sup> Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. <sup>3</sup> When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' <sup>4</sup> And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' <sup>5</sup> His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' <sup>6</sup> Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. <sup>7</sup> Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. <sup>8</sup> He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. <sup>9</sup> When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom <sup>10</sup> and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.' <sup>11</sup> Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.