

'God, the darkness between stars' – A Homily for Epiphany II

Isaiah 62.1-5

1 Corinthians 12.1-11

John 2.1-11

'Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars, His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm. We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too; but miss the reflection.'

'We look at people / And places as though he had looked / At them, too; but miss the reflection.' These words taken from R.S Thomas see God as the context, the 'great absence' that allows our world to emerge as something marked by grace, the 'empty silence' between things and people that allows them to breathe, that brings depth and meaning. But even as God looks at things, his gaze sees dignity and bestows love, whereas our human gaze sometimes misses 'the reflection,' seeing them only as objects for our own purposes, as things for own use.

But are we capable of seeing the world in this way, to search for the meaning of things, to grope after beauty, mystery, and meaning, or are we simply too blind to notice,

too lazy or distracted to take the time we need to do so?

John's Gospel plays with the themes of blindness and sight, light and darkness. While it is indeed a single world that John presents us with, he does it with a double-take, a kind of stereoscopic vision. The world as it is first seen is the world we all know so well – a world where people seek their own comfort and security whether politically, militarily or religiously; a world caught up in a spiritual malaise where only the material matters and people are seen as a resource or threat, as those to be used or expelled; a world paralysed by the fear of death; a world where there is simply not enough to go around. But John also paints us another picture of our world – this world is radically open to the promise and blessing of heaven; it is a world of miracle and abundance; a world of compassion, justice and joy; a world where the future enlivens the present; a world where people are given back their dignity and standing; a world freed from fear as fear has been cast out by love.

In the person and work of Jesus these two worlds collide. His life is an offering of abundance to those trapped in a world of scarcity; his life is an offering of love to those caught in an ideology of fear; his life is an offering of dignity to those diminished by guilt. This is why the Gospel of John is marked by conflict, because it is a conflict between two ways of being in the world, two ways of looking at the world, two ways of being human in the world. The first is the way of abundant love, the second of blindness and fear.

And Jesus knows that this offer of grace will be a costly one, and we can see that even here in the first of the signs that John gives us. The context is a wedding, a time of great joy and celebration we would hope, but also an event fraught with tension, as everyone's expectations for the perfect day squeeze together like a cork in a bottle of fizz. Something is just waiting to explode. But remember, John is always giving us a double-take, a world with two meanings. Like every wedding, this one doesn't just stand on its own merits, but points towards the future culmination of all human relationships, the eschatological end of all things: the coming wedding-banquet of Christ, the time, as Isaiah says, that 'as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.' This really is to be a time of joyful abundance and celebration as the wine of God's love

flows and everyone – particularly the forsaken and the desolate – are welcomed into the extravagance of this love.

But there is a problem, the wine is running out. The promise of joyful abundance is threatened by the small vision of men and women. A world alive to creativity and beauty is at risk as small-minded people reduce others to becoming means to an end rather than those who bear the dignity of the image of God. The future is threatened by a narrow fearfulness that believes that death cannot be undone and that lack, absence and limitation are the defining narratives of our world. God's future is threatened by those who have blinded themselves to its reality.

But Mary can see something else at work. In her Son she can see the divine offer of life, and so she speaks up to avoid the disaster. "Do whatever my son tells you" she says. But Jesus knows that the people are wilfully blind, that they have lost the capacity to see the truth, that they will not easily accept the offer of grace. The sadness behind his statement "my time is not yet," means that he knows that for God's full abundance to be seen the glamour of violence and hatred will need to be broken. Nothing less than the acceptance of the cross – that ultimate display of grace in a world trapped in fear and violence – will accomplish that. Water into wine now will require wine into blood later.

But Christ knows that the abundance of grace that he embodies cannot, will not, be defeated, whatever the cost will be to his own self. And so he acts, taking the tasteless and the mundane and transforming it into the miraculous and the wonderful. And so a single celebration is rescued and a glimpse of heaven is given.

It was Athanasius who said that in becoming man, Christ does not lower himself to our estate, but raises us up to his stature. How we live in our world will display this truth to others. Can we be those open to the colour, dignity, beauty and wonder of life, or will we be those who 'look at people / And places as though he had looked / At them, too; but miss the reflection?' I wonder.