

Well I spent the whole of Monday and Tuesday at a course about weddings which I'll tell you about in a moment so it's very appropriate that today's gospel reading is about a wedding – and not just any wedding but, arguably, the most famous wedding in history; even though we don't know who the bride and groom were – although, having said that, *some* people, those who take Dan Brown's the Da Vinci code seriously (and hopefully there aren't that many of them) but Dan Brown and his disciples believe that the wedding at Cana was Jesus's *own* wedding. To Mary Magdalene. Think about it (the argument goes) why would Jesus have been there with his *mum* unless it was *some* sort of family occasion and why would the servants have been talking to *her* about the wine situation unless she was groom's mother? Well, needless to say, scholars on the whole have been... somewhat slow to embrace that particular theory but it's no more absurd than the attempts

by Christians from the *temperance* tradition to say that Jesus would never have facilitated the drinking of alcohol. So these people argue that the greek word *oinon* which is what is translated wine throughout this passage was a generic word for any kind of drink derived from grapes including non-alcoholic grape juice. So clearly that's what Jesus must have turned the water into.

Well, you can only describe that as pythonesque and those of us who have seen Life of Brian will no doubt be reminded of the classic scene in which someone who's standing at the back during the sermon on the mount mishears blessed are the peacemakers and asks the man standing next to him what's so special about the cheesemakers to which the man replies in a rather patronising tone 'well obviously it's not supposed to be

taken *literally*, it refers to any manufacturers of dairy products.

So, 2000 years ago, Jesus turned water into wine and you now have Christians – and Christians who would, in every other case, insist on a literal interpretation of scripture – trying to turn it back. But it seems pretty clear to me that wine means wine here so what does all this tell us about Jesus?

Well, as I'm sure most of you know, the church of England marriage service refers to Jesus blessing the *institution* of marriage by his presence as a guest at this particular wedding. And clearly he was simply a guest but as a *good* guest, he entered into the *spirit* of the proceedings rather than grumpily sitting on the sidelines complaining that they weren't doing things the way *he*

would have liked them done. And that is very much the attitude that the course I attended this week was trying to promote. The entering into the spirit not the complaining. It's a course called the wedding project which was put together by the archbishop's council of the church of England and its aim is to help churches maximise the opportunity to connect with people at an important stage in their lives that weddings afford.

And the philosophy behind the course is that clergy today, like Jesus himself, should see themselves as *guests* at the weddings they conduct not the hosts. As John Sentamu, the archbishop of York and driving force behind the project, asked repeatedly throughout the course, Whose wedding is it?

You see, we tend to think that because they've come to *us* for a church wedding and because it's happening on 'our premises', we're in charge and are therefore entitled to tell them what they can and can't do in the service, what readings they can have, what hymns they can't – you often hear about vicars refusing to let people sing Jerusalem; at weddings *and* funerals and even those who don't object to the couples' choice of music might have the general attitude 'This is how *we* do it, so like it or lump it'. But is that the *right* attitude? OK the service is happening in church and clearly there *are some* limits but as well as asking 'whose *wedding* is it?' John Sentamu also asks, whose *church* is it? And the answer is clearly *God's*.

As regular members or even as clergy we may have got here *before* the people who only come for hatchings, matchings and dispatchings but we are still guests in

God's house just as they are and, as the archbishop very charmingly puts it, as guests who happen to have arrived early, our job is not to boss the newcomers *around* but to help our host and theirs *serve* the drinks and nibbles; a ministry of hospitality which helps people feel at home and makes it more likely that they'll want to come back after their wedding or exploratory visit on any given Sunday. And I have to say I find that a hugely inspiring vision of church and mission. I hope you do too.

Anyway, I don't really want to talk about marriage today – at least not marriage between a man and a woman, I want to focus instead, at this *benefice* service on what being a benefice, a *united* benefice of eight churches actually means because the fact is, while we eight parishes have been *engaged* to each other for some time (we've been *functioning* as the united wye benefice for the last couple

of years) we're still not legally married; we are, as it were, living in sin (!) and the bishop is keen to remedy this situation as soon as he can, to make an honest benefice of us!!!

Now this will involve the dissolution of the *existing* three benefices to which our 8 churches belong (the current wye benefice, mersham with hinxhill and sellinge and the stone street group) and the creation of a new legal entity, the *actual* united wye benefice – although as with marriage you could debate whether the ‘piece of paper’ *creates* the new reality or simply recognises it cos the fact is the overwhelming majority (about 75%) of people who get married in our churches (or should I say God's churches?) have been living together for quite a while beforehand. Indeed, 1 in 5 of them already have *children*, either together or from a previous marriage.

Now I don't want to get into the rights and wrongs of that this morning but a) whatever we think about that, clearly, like Jesus, we need to engage with people where they are *now* and b) in the case of our *benefice*, ‘trying before we buy’ definitely seems to have worked.

When the archdeacon came to the quarterly meeting of all the benefice wardens the other day, the unanimous consensus (it seemed to me) was that the arrangement was working very well and that there was no reason not to go ahead with making it official – as long as every church could retain its identity and to some degree its autonomy.

Now I say ‘to some degree’ with regard to autonomy cos obviously in any partnership, particularly a marriage some independence is lost but I can *assure* you as I have been assured by the archdeacon and thus the Bishop that

(absolutely) each of our eight churches will and must retain its unique and god-given identity. Indeed, what the archdeacon is inviting us to do over the next few months is to discuss, as individual churches at our PCCs or AGMs, what it is that makes our particular church our church, what we value about it and what we think it offers to the benefice that no other church does. A good example of this would be the way that Waltham, although it's one of the smaller congregations in our group, is going to host the new healing service starting in a few week's time.

We're also being asked to think about what we get from being a benefice (or what we *want* to get if they're different) and let me stress again that a *good* marriage enables two individuals (or in our case, eight *churches*) to flourish *as individuals* rather than eliminating their individuality. Indeed as one of the most popular poems

read at weddings in this country tells us, there *should* be *spaces* in our togetherness... we should fill each other's cups, but not drink from *one* cup. Apart from at benefice services! We should sing and dance together and be joyous, but each of us should also be alone. Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music. That's from the prophet by Kahlil Gibran's in case you don't know.

So what we're moving towards by the grace of god and under the inspiration of the holy spirit is greater *structural* unity but a unity that honours and delights in diversity. We don't know *exactly* what that will *look* like yet but that's precisely the point of the consultative process that begins with these discussions in pccs and which will continue over the course of the next year overseen by a working group consisting of myself, Madi, Terry the benefice chair

and Alec the benefice treasurer, who will report regularly to the benefice council and to the archdeacon. And at the end of that process we hope it will be clear to *everybody* what the sensible way forward is and what kind of structure will best serve our collective vision and indeed, *God's* vision because as the Archbishop so rightly says, ultimately, all 'our' churches belong to him... that's, God not the archbishop!

So if you want to contribute to this discussion or if you have any questions please speak to your church wardens or to one of the working group and please *pray* because what we all want is for *God's* will to be done and for his kingdom to come in all 'our' churches and in all our lives. Amen.