

**Baruch 4: 36 – end of 5; John 2: 1 - 11**

**Today we are celebrating Epiphany.** Actually it's usually celebrated on 6 January, after Twelfth Night, but we are always permitted to keep the feast on the nearest Sunday, that is today.

The Book of Common Prayer calls the feast 'The Epiphany or the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles', and the Gospel reading at the Eucharist is the account of the visit of the wise men to the infant Jesus in St Matthew's Gospel. The important point is that the wise men were not Jews, and the message is that Jesus is the Saviour of everyone, Gentiles as well as Jews.

But our lessons this evening are not directly related to the idea of the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. They are both set in purely Jewish contexts, but they give us much food for thought.

**The first lesson was from the Book of Baruch. (Baruch 4, 36 – end of 5)** The name possibly doesn't ring a bell for you. In our church it is to be found in the Apocrypha, those books which are printed between the Old Testament and the New Testament in some of our Bibles, although not all. (It actually took me a little time to find an English Bible in my study which contained the Apocrypha, at least in English. My Welsh and Latin Bibles include it.) In the Roman Catholic Church the books of the Apocrypha are included in the Old Testament. The Thirty Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England tell us that the books of the Apocrypha are to be read for examples 'of life and instruction of manners', but not to establish doctrine.

Baruch was probably the secretary of the great prophet Jeremiah, although scholars disagree about this, but the setting of the book is when the Jews were in exile in Babylon. The reading this evening was possibly a song or canticle, looking forward to the joyful return of the Jewish people to the city of Jerusalem, gathered from east and west at God's word. The final verse is full of hope: *'For God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.'*

When we look at our world today there are so many wars and so much suffering. I know that so many people have given up listening to the news because the news is so awful. The exiles in Babylon must have felt that all was lost. They would be stuck in exile far away from their own land for ever. Here was a prophet who reminded them that this was God's world, and one day God would bring them back to Jerusalem in joy. Never lose hope. *'Look towards the east, O Jerusalem, and see the glory that is coming to you from God'*.

While the Book of Baruch is really unknown to most of us, the second lesson (**John, 2, 1-11**) is surely one of the most well known passages in the Bible, St John's account of the wedding at Cana in Galilee. It will be heard again in a fortnight's time at the morning Eucharist.

Many years ago when I was Rector of Myddle we had a hot pot supper in the Village Hall followed by entertainment by a magician, a very good magician in my limited experience of magicians or conjurors. Several times I wondered 'How did he do that?'. And that, I expect, is what you might be asking about that reading in which Jesus turned something between 20 and 30 gallons, yes gallons, of water into wine, and good wine at that. 'How did he do that?'. St John still remembered that amazing event probably 60 years later when he wrote his Gospel. St John doesn't tell this miracle story merely as a parable. He tells it as an event which really happened. The story had a symbolic meaning but he was convinced that Jesus really turned the water into wine. We may find it difficult to accept that Jesus turned the water into wine, but we should be clear that the Gospels present strong evidence that Jesus did many mighty deeds, which indicate that God was uniquely present and active in Jesus.

St John calls the miracles of Jesus 'signs' and at the end of his Gospel he writes that the signs have been recorded to enable his readers to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Saviour. And so it is fitting that this reading about the first of the seven signs should be heard on Epiphany, an early indication if you like of Jesus as the universal Saviour of all, Jews and Gentiles.

**PTO**

There is, I think, a deeper meaning to this story, or so scholars say. The water was kept in stone jars for ceremonial washing before a meal according to Jewish law. What did St John read into this? It has been suggested that Jesus meant to replace the old religion of the Jews – represented by water - with the Gospel of Jesus – represented by new and good wine. The Jewish religion was not, of course, in itself bad. It had been founded as a Covenant with God on Mount Sinai to create a holy nation to bring the whole world under God's rule. Over the centuries, however, the Jews had lost the sense of being an instrument in God's hand and had become obsessed with the privilege of being God's chosen people. Religion had become more concerned with petty details and ceremonial than with real faith and love. Jesus was declaring that the old religion must be renewed. Water must become wine. It's the same liquid, that hasn't changed, but it is transformed and new.

This experience of newness should be a continuing element in the Church's experience down the ages, and today. But sometimes the sense of newness can be hard to maintain. Of course any experience tends to dull in time, tends to go a bit stale. We need always to aim to revive our faith, to keep it new and fresh, both as individuals and as the people of God. When we walk with Jesus we can be renewed, be changed, while remaining ourselves, just as the liquid in the jars remained the same liquid, but changed from water into wine. Weak, tepid water can become the best wine, sparkling and fresh.

In the new year of grace pray that your religion is not mere ritual or habit, but is new every morning, like the best wine, which brought joy to the marriage feast in Cana of Galilee, which transforms our lives with joy, and which prepares us for the marriage feast in heaven.

William Price