

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

Today's readings are so rich in metaphor and spiritual depth. They point to the danger of reading Scripture literally and failing to appreciate the poetry of the inspired writers. We need to bear in mind that the biblical writers were Jewish, and we have to read their works through Jewish eyes if we are to interpret them accurately.

Isaiah 62:1-5 This reads like a paean or a lyric poem in honour of Jerusalem. Scholars debate about who the speakers are in these verses but what is clear is that, in the language of metaphor, Jerusalem has taken on a new identity. Following the destruction of the city and its temple in 586 BCE Jerusalem was considered *shemamah*, desolate, and *azubah*, abandoned. These are both terms describing the heart-breaking end of a relationship by which one or both parties are left totally grief-stricken and rudderless.

We are aware of the sorrow and loss suffered by the exiled community in Babylon just from hints like Psalm 137 – *By the waters of Babylon we sat and wept...when we remembered Jerusalem*. Now, with the return of the exiles, two to three generations later, the scene is different. Jerusalem is now called *kheftzibah*, my delight is in her, in other words Jerusalem is now the Lord's delight.

On top of that, the love relationship has been restored and Jerusalem is now *beulah* or married. In the culture of the time this means she is now a much loved bride who will be taken care of by a devoted husband. The Lord is portrayed as the bridegroom who cannot believe his good fortune, who is head over heels in love with his bride. This speaks of a fulfilling and secure relationship governed by mutual respect and honour.

Each party is now looking to what they can contribute to the relationship and are not concerned with what they will get out of it. We all know how partnerships founder when one or both sides are in it for personal gain.

Psalm 95/96 This is a call to sing a new song. It rings with the joy of restoration, the rebuilding of a relationship that has sunk beneath the waves but has not yet crashed irreparably on the rocks. Its song is, give the Lord glory and credit for having lifted us up and set us back on the path to wholeness.

1 Corinthians 12:4-11 Having virtually 'put in the boot' in the previous section of his letter, Paul now addresses the subject of spiritual gifts. He told the community he was not happy with the abuses that had crept into their conduct of the Lord's Supper, the Eucharistic meal. There was discrimination between the poor of the community and the better-off members and Paul wrote that this was not only appalling in a sacred ritual like the Lord's Supper but an abuse of the body of Christ, which is the living community.

In today's passage Paul focuses on the Spirit who is the source of all good spiritual gifts. The powerful point he makes is that all gifts are designed to benefit the community. No gift is purely for personal gain or reputation. He is really saying that if I recognise a gift in myself I need to ask how I can use it for the benefit of the community. Spiritual gifts only work when they are given away.

Notice how practical Paul gets. If I have the gift of faith, or more precisely the gift of trust, then how can I use my optimism and positive outlook to lift up and encourage another? I may have the gift of healing, not necessarily to work physical miracles, but to help restore someone else's mental balance and health with my encouragement and support. We are all called to be healers.

How will another person be better off and lifted up because of my gift?

Everything Paul writes about in this passage involves getting outside ourselves to be a lifter for others. A point of context in Paul's writing is the importance some of the Corinthians were giving to the gift of tongues. This was not speaking in a recognisable foreign language but giving voice to unintelligible sounds prompted by a trance-like moment of inspiration in prayer. Paul argued that speaking in 'tongues', good as it was, did not benefit the community because it could not be interpreted by anyone else.

Key take-home messages in this passage are that we do well to name those gifts we have that can be of practical service to others, and to explore just how we can use them to contribute to the life of the family, group or community we belong to. How will another person be better off and lifted up because of my gift?

John 2:1-11 The wedding at Cana is a familiar story for all of us, but many of the points the gospel writer is making often sail smoothly over our heads. It's good to be aware at the outset that the John writer calls Jesus's action a sign. The Synoptic gospels call similar actions 'deeds of power' in order to

emphasise that Jesus is acting with the power of God. The gospel writers avoid using the normal Greek words for miracle or wonder, quite probably to avoid any association with magic. People who witness a healing by Jesus are said to ‘wonder’ and be ‘astonished’ but the deed or healing itself is brought about by God’s power, not magic.

John uses the word ‘sign’ to make it clear that these are not miracles but signs of a greater reality. The ‘sign’ points to something outside the deed or event itself and is designed to push us, the reader, to look beyond the sign for meaning.

Jesus is the food and drink for our spiritual life

The scenario of the wedding feast created by John sets the tone for the sign. It is a joyous event that celebrates the happy union of a couple, but it risks being undermined by the lack of the catalyst for joy and a good time – wine. Without it the party is going to be seriously flat. What is the wine of my spiritual relationship? How do I keep the supply up? If Christ himself is the answer, how do I nourish this relationship by seeing him in others?

Jesus’s mother approaches him about the wine drought and he indicates some lack of concern because his time has not yet come. The key action in his life for others is his death and John draws attention to timing – all things at the proper time. Jesus’s response is a guidepost pointing to his ultimate act of love. However, he does take action, instructs the servants to fill the large ritual washing jars with water – this is water used for ceremonial washing and cleanness – and then get the steward to sample it. It turns out to be not only quality wine, but 180 gallons of quality wine. In our money that works out to be roughly 1,090 standard bottles of wine. Really!?! And here we have a prime characteristic of the 7 Johannine signs. They are all exaggerated beyond belief. Why? Because John is saying that Jesus is the bread and wine, the food and drink for our spiritual life, offered in extravagant abundance, in over-the-top supply. He is also saying that Jesus fulfils everything that the rituals of Judaism had to offer. We are not best served by the water of ‘religion’, it is the fine wine of Jesus and his values that we must strive for.

The whole of John’s gospel is about our capacity to turn water into wine

All through his gospel John urges us not to read Jesus literally. Think of Nicodemus, the first literalist, who cannot understand what being ‘born again’ means; the Samaritan woman who thinks ‘living water’ comes from a well; the people of Capernaum who are outraged, thinking Jesus is offering them his human flesh and blood. They have not looked beyond the words to deeper spiritual meanings. In fact, John virtually ridicules those who read Jesus literally, who do not have the insight to grasp the spiritual reality he is alluding to. The whole of John’s gospel is about our capacity to turn water into wine by stepping up a level to live life to the full, following the way of Jesus (John 10:10). That’s the miracle of this story.

Can you imagine the wine merchants of Galilee rushing up to Jesus with their business cards after hearing the Cana story? On the contrary, it would be a pity to read this story literally and miss the gems John is highlighting. John’s signs draw us to a new level of consciousness about the person and meaning of Jesus. We cannot ‘fly’ with the riches of this mystical gospel if our feet remain on the ground with Nicodemus, held down by the myopia of questions like, ‘Did this really happen?’ Many Christians are afraid that if a gospel story is not literally true, it may not be true at all. There is no ‘one’ way to interpret Scripture. It takes insight and practice to rise above the literal level and reflect on the higher spiritual treasures that have meaning for our lives.



To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work. Mary Oliver (American poet; died January 2019)

The beautiful you is your kindness and compassion toward others

The beautiful you is your tolerance and patience

The beautiful you is your ability to love and forgive.

Micheline Jean Louis (poet)



What sits at the bottom of the sea and twitches?

A nervous wreck.

What do you call a parade of rabbits hopping backwards?

A receding hare-line.

Laurie Woods