

The Fullness of Life

The Third Sunday of Epiphany (Year B) - 21.01.2024

Genesis 14.17-20 | Psalm 128 | Revelation 19.6-10 | John 2.1-11

Reading

2 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. **2** Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. **3** When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." **4** And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to me and to you? My hour has not yet come." **5** His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." **6** Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. **7** Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. **8** He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the person in charge of the banquet." So they took it. **9** When the person in charge tasted the water that had become wine and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), that person called the bridegroom **10** 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." **11** Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him. (John 2.1-11)

Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Sermon

I. Longing for healing and peace in a hopeless present

Dear friends in Christ!

What does it truly mean to live? This is a question I have been asking myself more and more over the last weeks, months and years. It seems we can no longer get out of crisis mode. We had barely put the worst of the Corona pandemic behind us when Russia invaded Ukraine. Those in power are again openly threatening to use military force. Did humanity really learn nothing after the horrors of the First and Second World Wars?

And then came Hamas' cruel massacre of over a thousand Jews within Israel last year. Since then, Israel has been attacking targets in the Gaza Strip in response to the terrorist attack.

And the questions and challenges of climate change are anything but answered or on the way to being resolved. Peace and security are fragile. Especially in our day and age we are becoming alarmingly aware of how interconnected all regions of the world actually are.

We in Europe cannot close our eyes to the war, violence and suffering of the global community. Current migration movements show this clearly. We live in a world that is broken and longing for healing and peace.

And the church itself often seems unwilling to learn. Abuse, inflexible structures and a decline in membership in Europe are just a few of the issues that churches are having to face today. Theologically speaking, we still live in a world (and church) that is marked by sin and death.

II. Search for answers to life

Especially in times when life seems to be falling apart, people are looking for answers and the meaning of life. We all have developed strategies and answers for coping and living

with this fundamental question about the deepest reason for life. Maybe you have a similar experience?

There are those who try to uncover the true essence of life behind all the deceptive facades and distractions of modern life by limiting life to the essential minimum. An example of this is found in the American writer Henry David Thoreau. In his famous book "Walden" written at the end of the 19th century we read:

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion."¹

All of us who have seen the film "Dead Poets Society" will probably be very familiar with the above quote, where it is reproduced.

Others are in despair when they see the apparent meaninglessness of the world. They react with cynicism and dark humour. The American film director Woody Allen makes a living out of it. He once said: "I'm astounded by people who want to 'know' the universe when it's hard enough to find your way around Chinatown."² and "God is silent. Now if only man would shut up."³

III. The fullness of life is revealed in Jesus

The Gospel of John offers us a different perspective. In the first chapter the author writes: "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."⁴ John is

1 <https://www.environmentandsociety.org/mml/walden-or-life-woods>

2 <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/194144-i-m-astounded-by-people-who-want-to-know-the-universe>

3 <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/21524-god-is-silent-now-if-only-man-would-shut-up>

4 John 1.3-4

saying that in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the fullness of life is to be found. He is the only son of the Father who showed us who God really is. God is love (as it says in the first letter of John).⁵

A few verses later in the Gospel of John John the Baptist confesses: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"⁶ In the incarnation, in Jesus' death on the cross and in his resurrection, everything that separates us from God is pushed aside out of love and mercy. In and through Jesus Christ we already share in the fullness of divine life here and now.

At the wedding in Cana, of which only the Gospel of John gives an account, Jesus powerfully reveals himself as the Word of God made flesh in the first of seven public miracles.

Jesus reveals who he is by turning water into wine. One of the servants is so impressed by this miracle that he says in amazement: "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."⁷

Wine was a basic food at the time of Jesus. And even more so at a wedding. Embarrassingly, the wedding party was about to run out of wine. Jesus saves the situation and turns water into wine.

And there is water in abundance. 6 jars of water measuring about 500 - 700 litres of water. This leads to an incredibly large amount of wine. That would be around 700 - 900 bottles of our current wine bottles. And it is also wine of the best quality. **What a luxury!**

In many Jewish and early Christian texts, such an abundance of wine is often a symbol for the coming of the messianic age. The wine miracle can therefore be read as a reference to the dawn of the messianic age.⁸ It is an age that promises life in abundance. Divine life goes far beyond the material minimum that is necessary for life. Life in abundance is

5 Cf. 1 John 4.7

6 John 1.29

7 John 2.10

8 Cf. Wengst, Klaus (2019): Das Johannesevangelium. Kohlhamer: Stuttgart.

always both material necessity and joy. And ultimately, joy is vital. It is life-giving. Without joy life is incomplete. Wine here in John's Gospel is a symbol for the joy Jesus brings.

In each and every celebration of the Eucharist we celebrate that in and through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the fullness of life can already be experienced. Under the elements of bread and wine Jesus is truly present. God comes very close to us in bread and wine. The celebration of the Eucharist is a tangible and effective sign of hope that in the end war, violence, environmental destruction, death and suffering will not have the last word. The divine life in abundance has already won.

IV. In the beginning there is faith!

Finally there is good news and bad news. I already talked about the bad news at the beginning of the sermon. This world continues to be marked by sin and death. We see this every day when we read, hear and watch the news. And, if we are honest, we have to face the fact that we are all part of this broken world with its bright but also sometimes very dark sides. This also applies to churches and church communities. The Safeguarding procedures exist in the Church of England for good reasons. Far too often churches haven't been safe places for vulnerable people.

The good news is we all have access to the fullness of life in God through Jesus! How? - Well, at the beginning there is the underlying acceptance by those who believe that the messianic age has dawned with Jesus Christ, who out of love suffered death on the cross and thereby wiped away all that separates us from God, **sin!** In the beginning there is faith!⁹

From Paul's perspective, this is what it sounds like in Romans: "[S]ince all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith."¹⁰

9 Cf. John 12.44-50

10 Romans 3.23-25

V. When the love of God can be experienced

And that's all we have to do as sinners in a broken and sinful world? We believe and then everything will be fine? Forget it? It is not really a problem? I think it's a bit more complex. There is also Jesus' legacy of the new commandment as recorded in the Gospel of John.

Jesus left us with a mission to live daily. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."¹¹ We should take Jesus' life as an example. Jesus came to serve and not to be served. He did good things: He healed the sick, brought the good news to the poor, and healed the brokenhearted. He took care of those who were on the margins of society.

Sadly, we won't always succeed in following Jesus' commandment. Remember: We remain frail people in this broken world. But we can and we must try again and again, trusting always that God loves us first. God calls us to a life of abundance and of joy out of love and kindness.

Here again, Paul's perspective in Romans is helpful. He writes: "Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"¹² There is always the possibility of turning around and starting over. Let us as a community of believers become a place where people notice that we are disciples of Jesus by seeking to follow his new commandment of love. God calls us to life in abundance, to life in its fullness. It is a life of abundant joy.

Amen.

¹¹ John 13.34-35

¹² Romans 2.4

Summary

In Jesus, through faith, we already share in divine life in the here and now. In every Eucharist we celebrate that God has come very close to us in Jesus in order to free us to abundant life and joy through his incarnation, his life, his cross and his resurrection. God gives us a life in communion with him despite our guilt and sin. Our task: Accepting the undeserved gift and following the commandment of love.

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