

“Extravagant Abundance” a sermon given by Margaret Garland on the second Sunday after Epiphany, preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand, Sunday 16 January 2022. Readings: Isaiah 62:1-5, John 2:1-11.

We pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O God, our rock and our sustainer. Amen.

So, welcome to 2022. How has the year been so far? Hopefully there has been a chance for each of you to take a breath and be renewed for the year ahead. It is interesting how we sit with that sense of new beginnings each January. It is often, I have found, a time of optimism, clear thinking, expressed desires and wishes. A place where we assess what has gone before and lay plans for what is to come.

We have, however, found out these last two years that planning is not the best of companions in a pandemic situation. So instead we lay out some hopes and wait, with some degree of nervousness, to see what might come of them.

It would be fair to say that one of the casualties of the current time, among other things, is planning weddings - and some rethinking has to be done, often on a moment's notice. Four days before we went into level 4 last year I took a wedding for a couple who had realised that their post Easter wedding was looking increasingly unlikely and that the only chance to celebrate their commitment to each other was with family (limited to 10) at church with the reception around the table at home. It was every bit as special – but certainly not what they had planned.

The wedding that John speaks of in Cana was, we imagine, very well planned – they were important occasions after all for everyone concerned. But, heaven forbid, partway through they ran out of wine. And Mary, Jesus mother, turned to her son for help. He reluctantly made it his time for his first miracle of ministry – water into wine.

Now in this day and age, we might be tut-tutting about the excess of alcohol – surely they'd had enough. In fact if you start throwing stats around you might want to say they had definitely had enough. Indications are that more than 300 litres of water are turned into wine – and not just any old wine but the very best, top quality, 'sending your palate to heaven' variety. So say 300 guests – that is a litre of wine each - and it wasn't the first drink of the night. But the extravagance doesn't stop at the quantity – the quality too is way beyond the expectation of the steward and no doubt the hosts and guests. What is going on here? Why this extravagant abundance when a less lavish demonstration of

Jesus' miracle touch would have served well enough? Let us park that question for a moment while we look to the reading from Isaiah.

It is helpful to know the context - – Isaiah is speaking to a people who have returned from exile, who had high hopes for returning to a new Jerusalem, but who are struggling because it is not turning out the way they had hoped. Things have gone wrong; the dreams long nurtured in their desolation have been broken, faith in their God has been sorely tested and is crumbling into dust. Their plans are not working out the way they expected and they are crying out 'where are you, God'. Isaiah is acknowledging their pain and reassures them that he will not cease pleading their cause, not rest until Jerusalem is raised from the ashes. He demands action of God for the people of God. And then he moves to remind the people of God's great love for them, of the extravagant abundance of blessing that is found in their relationship with their Lord. This is a new beginning; of hope and delight and joy and commitment - and Isaiah uses the imagery of the marriage vows to anchor this new relationship into the lives of the people of God. The generous language of hope and promise lifts up the people even in the midst of the struggle that is the rebuilding of their lives and their dreams.

I wonder if sometimes we are a bit uncomfortable with 'over the top' expressions – words, acts, thoughts, emotions? I sometimes am. I want to hold a bit of myself back just so the disappointment won't be so hard to handle or so I can say – ah well it was too good to be true. (Which is an absolutely useless tactic by the way.) But seriously I believe that John is wanting to point out to us that there are times when we need to let go of logical planning and cautious approaches – that, along with the realisation that life can be tough, we also need to lose our inhibitions and dive deep into the extravagance of God's abundant and overflowing love.

The Gospels are full of stories of God's extravagant, generous, overflowing gifts, love and mercy: the open-armed welcome for the prodigal child, a catch of fish so great that it overwhelms the boats, the over-supply of bread and fishes, the anointing of Jesus with a ridiculously expensive oil; from the cradle to the cross we are surrounded by signs of abundance and celebration. We can almost hear Jesus saying "what part of abundant love don't you understand?"

Because we do seem to struggle with stories like this – extravagance is often associated with too much money, with waste, with unsustainability and inequality; the delight of abundance seems at odds with our world view of

careful management and future proofing, excessive generosity can be seen as a burden or a debt to be paid back or harbour barely disguised envy.

Signs of irrepressible largesse make us uncomfortable, twitchy.

In our life of faith we can also see signs of this reluctance to delight in our God, to celebrate exuberantly the extravagant abundant love that is our relationship with Jesus Christ, even in, or especially in the hard times. Thankfully we are losing the labels of dour and emotionless and joyless – at long last – and finding our way into laughter, tears, joy and totally unrealistic hope in the power of love to see us through the struggles, and celebrations of life. As Isaiah realised so clearly, it is one of the paradoxes of faith that in our deepest need, we find our greatest treasure.

So here are some questions we have to ask ourselves; what is that what Jesus wants us to be and to do? Does he want our faith to be morose, our response to the joy of living in Christ to be muted and rationed? In other words are we doling out the wedding wine by the shot glass, while Jesus is pouring it out by the 50 litre flagon? Is the face we are showing to each other and the world one of cautious measured optimism or do we occasionally throw caution to the winds and celebrate the extravagance of living in God's love and promise?

Let us remember: that throughout his life and his ministry Jesus celebrated people – people getting married, people being healed, people enjoying meals together, people indulging in uncontainable laughter – he carried a spirit of celebration with him wherever he went as he proclaimed a God of love and hope and peace and joy.

This joyous wedding feast at Cana is today a sign to the church that we are to rejoice in being the people of God and to toast the world with the amazing good news of grace and love gifted to us in Jesus.¹ Our joy is sourced in our relationship with our extravagant abundant God and we are to allow that joy to flow not only through our lives, but into the lives of each other and all whom we know. Have you ever had someone come up to you and say – 'you have look on your face that suggests you know something special and it makes you really happy'? Now you can say – ah it is Cana-Grace!

What a way for Jesus to begin his public ministry in John's Gospel! What a way for us to continue that ministry – brothers and sisters in Christ celebrating the extravagant abundance of the love of God for us in our everyday lives –every day of the week. 2022, here we come. Amen

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1* by Robert Brearly p. 262

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN
*Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,
made known in Jesus, given in grace*



Knox Church
449 George Street
Dunedin
New Zealand
Ph. (03) 477 0229
www.knoxchurch.net