

22.01.12 St Barnabas' Clapham Common
GIVING: John 2.1-11: how much is enough?

Reading John 2.1-11 suggests a question: *how much is enough?*

When Jesus performs this miracle with drinking water and purification jars, it results in about 150 gallons of wine, which is 568 litres, or 757 bottles or 63 crates, and which is far more than can reasonably be drunk. The obvious question is why so much?

Or to put that another way, *how much is enough?* It's a question that constantly recurs.

At a time when there is unrest about the future of pensions and outrage at executive bonuses, *how much is enough?*

In an age of quantitative easing and deficit reduction, fear of recession and currencies facing collapse, *how much is enough?*

In a culture of consumerism, devouring resources with its ideology of more, *how much is enough?*

In a world where anxiety about energy security generates ever increasing bills, *how much is enough?*

It's an expression of our collective and individual anxiety and concern: *how much is enough?*

And perhaps this morning you've even thought it, consciously or otherwise, in relation to our own church finances.

We've paid all the bills and made ends meet: *how much is enough?*

We're being asked for more parish share: *how much is enough?*

We'd like to invest in resources for growth: *how much is enough?*

We've got our expenditure and our income: *how much is enough?*

How we answer that question for ourselves will depend on the view we have of the money in the church accounts; whether we think of money as a financial reality or as a spiritual one. It's easy to set those two things against each other - the financial and the spiritual - but to cut to the chase, our view of money needs to be both.

There are concrete financial aspects to our spiritual life together; in other words, we have a building to maintain, and we have bills to pay. But that also needs to be inverted. As well as saying there are concrete financial aspects to our spiritual life together, we also need to say that there is a deeply spiritual dimension to our personal and church finances too, a perspective on our money that isn't just about buildings and bills but about something else altogether. And to find out what that might be, we can go back and rejoin the wedding at Cana.

You know the story well no doubt. The wedding reception is underway but the guests are thirstier than anticipated. Someone has misjudged the quantity of wine that the week long wedding feast would require.

How much is enough? More than they had catered for.

But, somehow aware of this socially embarrassing shortage, Mary gets a reluctant Jesus involved in this crisis of scarcity. Despite his slightly distant response to his own mother, Jesus takes the initiative like she thought he should, and you know what happens next. The servants fill the jars with water and upon serving this to the master of the banquet, he declares it a good vintage.

From water into wine, from scarcity to abundance.

How much is enough? More than anyone dreamed of.

We don't know how he did it, we're not told that, but Jesus has transformed scarcity into surplus with a sign of outstanding generosity. And if we make a few short observations about Jesus' generosity,

perhaps we might note some of the following things:

Jesus Generosity is Extravagant:

150 gallons was way more than enough wine; the quantity suggests that people can have as much as they want.

It's a bit like a free bar where Jesus will pick up the tab. He's the only one buying the rounds and whoever wants a drink can have one; that's my sort of drinking buddy!

Jesus Generosity is Reckless:

In our more censorious selves we could criticise Jesus for his over enthusiastic miracle: hasn't he forgotten about the consequences of consuming too much wine?

Whether he had or he hadn't, he didn't let it limit what he chose to do; a reckless extravagance seems to be part of the meaning. It just wouldn't have been the same if Jesus had said to the servants,

“Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet...
and tell him there's enough for everyone to have
no more than another two glasses each.”

(And I don't think we need to go all moral on Jesus about it anyway; trying to out-moral Jesus might be a hard argument to win!).

Jesus Generosity is Gracious:

Despite the slightly terse exchange with his mother, Jesus undertakes the miracle to save a wedding that was neither his, nor his to save either. In doing so, there is no criticism of the groom or the master of the banquet for their deficient preparations.

If it had been me, I would have had a moan or two in their direction but there's none of that; Jesus just gets on and saves the day because that's just the way he is, and in v.10, he even lets the bridegroom take the credit too.

Jesus Generosity is Confounding:

Although Mary and the servants knew the source of the wine, it's clear that the Master of the banquet was none the wiser. And of course, no one at all knows how Jesus did the miracle. If the servants draw water from the ceremonial jars, by the time the Master of the Banquet tastes it, it has become the best wine of the feast; they don't know how and neither do we.

If generosity on this scale is extravagant, reckless and gracious then generosity in this manner is no less confounding as well.

Jesus Generosity is All-embracing:

This wine wasn't just for those on the top table, it was for everyone. And as the custom was that the poorer, less important, less privileged guests would arrive at a later stage of the feasting, then the implication seems to point towards an inclusive, all-embracing generosity, equally on offer to everyone.

We'd all buy drinks for our friends. Jesus will get them for everyone, especially perhaps for those who couldn't afford to get him one back.

So that's the substance of Jesus' generosity in 5 particular words: it's extravagant, it's reckless, it's gracious, it's confounding, it's all-embracing

How much is enough? Well, there you go for starters.

And if we rearrange these 5 words and make a small amendment along the way...

...then we get the substance of Jesus generosity in just 1 particular word:

G-enerous
R-eckless
A-ll-embracing
C-onfounding
E-xtravagant

How much is enough? Grace gives us the answer. In its generous, reckless, all embracing confounding and extravagant way, grace gives us the answer.

The substance of Jesus' generosity is grace; it's what Jesus does, it's how Jesus operates, it's what Jesus is in his attitude and actions towards us. It's true of this miracle where Jesus reveals his glory; it's true of his self-giving when eventually his hour does come and he gives his life for us on the cross.

Grace gives everything.

When we read about the wedding at Cana we might ask why did Jesus make so much wine? Grace replies how could he make any less? And if the substance of Jesus' generosity is transforming grace then it will be our experience of his grace which transforms our generosity.

Following his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road, in all the NT letters that Paul subsequently writes, it never takes him more than 2 sentences to mention grace and bestow it upon his readers in a cascade of praise and benediction. From breathing out murderous threats against an embryonic church to giving up concerns for his own security in order to serve it, Paul's life was totally transformed by grace.

And on a more mundane level, if we know nothing of God's grace then specific talk about our own level of giving will feel like an unwelcome duty or an unwanted tax. We will ask *how much is enough?* in order to limit what we think we should reasonably contribute, anxious simply about making ends meet.

But when we are transformed by God's grace and our giving becomes infected with gratitude and praise then we come to see it, first and foremost, as worship. Not that this is to put a charge upon grace, a sort of ecclesiastical stealth tax on your spirituality for something that should be delivered free of charge at the point of need. But because money is so intimately related to its possessor, because so much of ourselves is tied up with our finances (whatever their condition), to give money consistently is to give of ourselves to God; and to give of ourselves to God... well that's what worship is.

And if this is so, when we ask *how much is enough?* we won't be asking with a view to capping what we give, we'll be asking from a grateful heart which has been drowned in the wine of God's gracious generosity.

When we read about the wedding at Cana we might ask why did Jesus make so much wine? Grace replies how could he make any less?

Anxious about scarcity we ask *how much is enough?* And then we read about about God's wondrous, inexplicable, transforming generosity towards us in Jesus and we realise that grace gives us the answer.