

This week I seem to have caught the bus a lot in between meetings and events. And at the moment every time I am on the bus I get the giggles. Because after every time the bus stops you hear a new recorded announcement 'Please hold on – the bus is about to move'. It makes me giggle for 2 reasons. Firstly the message almost always comes after the bus is already moving; and secondly because my brain wonders – what is it that we are holding on too?

I thought it was just my sense of humour, but as it turns out this new safety message on London buses has led to a great deal of media interest and activity. There are those who say that the announcement is so annoying it is going to cause a revolution in a short period of time. My favourite argument was "*They are so annoying. They shouldn't go off at every single stop. People know that the bus is going to move – that's the point of buses*¹." Others of course have said but people forget that is the point, and reminders might help people hold on before they fall.

It is amazing to see that what I found as amusing on Monday – had caused such a reaction – 3 short words that have almost caused aggressive action!

Despite whether they are a good thing or not, they have led to some interesting questions for me and what it is we think the purpose of something is – or even more simply – what do we hold on to!

The commuter who pointed out that the purpose of the bus is to move – we hope – though that wasn't my experience sitting on a bus at hanger lane for over 20 minutes earlier in the week – is correct ; surely we know what a bus is for and so should be prepared that it will move. But it raises an interesting question – do we always remember what something is for? Are we always prepared for the purpose to happen?

I have spent a great deal of time over the last months thinking and re thinking about what our purpose here is as church. I have had this conversation with many of you; as well as with many in the wider community. For me the primary purpose of church is communal Christian prayer and worship – that doesn't mean we don't provide hospitality for other things, or that we are a great resource to the local and wider community, or that we not engaged in mission – we do all these things. But the fact is the primary reason the church exists is worship of the God we believe in – in a sense it is a place where we can hold on.

So much of my day and week is taken up by administration, building and people management – sometimes I can forget why I am here! What is our purpose? And then things happen – maybe it is an annoying announcement, maybe it is sitting with someone and listening to their story, or praying with a family as we prepare for a funeral, or as I speak with someone about what God is calling them to – I am reminded why I, why we - are here.

¹ <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/london-bus-safety-announcements-commuters-call-for-end-to-pointless-and-annoying-warnings-telling-a3744251.html>

Our age seems to be driven by a sense of purpose, sometimes it feels that we only do things that we will get something out of. But this is not the case with faith. Faith is a response to our experience of God; and more pointedly our experience of the grace of God.

During Epiphany season we are focused on the manifestation – that is our understanding of who Jesus is. It starts with the arrival of the Magi, then continues with the story of Christ Baptism, and a recognition of the voice of God pronouncing that Jesus is God's son, and includes the story of Jesus first public act – which for John is the changing of water into wine at the wedding of Cana. (In Matthew it is the Sermon on the Mount). It concludes next Sunday as Jesus is recognized by Simeon and Anna, when he comes to be presented in the Temple according to the Law of Israel².

Epiphany is a season which helps us remember how we recognise who God is, and is like an announcement which reminds us to hold on to this promise – even though at one level we should already know this by virtue of our faith.

There are many ways to consider the story of Jesus at the wedding in Cana. It was obviously an event that his whole family were invited to, as he was there with his mother and their friends. For the writer of John's gospel this almost insignificant event which is seen by only a few at the wedding and us, is a crucial to our understanding of who Jesus is.

We should remember that the miracles Jesus performs in the Fourth Gospel are never called miracles but signs. In other words, the miracle itself is not really what we are supposed to see, as miraculous as it is. True, water into wine would be quite something, especially on a Sunday afternoon. Rather, the miracles point to a truer revelation about Jesus.

In this sign, the details of abundance cannot be overlooked -- six water jars, each 75 – 100 litres (20 -30 Gallons), filled to the brim, of the best wine. The amount in and of itself is extraordinary. But the best wine? At this point in a wedding celebration? Unheard of. Back in the day, weddings typically lasted a week, where the host would serve the better wine when the guests could actually taste what they were drinking³.

Jesus could have ignored what was happening at the wedding, but he listened to the request of his mother and was generous in his response. It is a good image to hold onto. So often we forget that God wants us to know the feeling of grace, to know God's abundance. Epiphany Season can be a time to remind ourselves to experience this, to hold onto the promise.

There is something else going on in this story too. Jesus says his time has not yet come. For John that means the journey to Calvary – but despite the time not being

² <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/churchs-year/times-and-seasons/epiphany#mmm72>

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1556

right; Jesus wants those around him to know and experience God's love. It is quite a gift. Then in the background – as she always is – we have Mary. I was really helped this week by a commentary written on this text by theologian Karoline Lewis

She points out that an important detail in this first sign, this first act of Jesus' public ministry, is that his mother is present. In the Gospel of John, the mother of Jesus is never named, never called Mary. She is always denoted by her relationship to Jesus. Here, it is her urging that initiates Jesus' action.

The exchange between Jesus and his mother is really quite funny. She notes that the wedding hosts have run out of wine. Jesus' response is that they should have hired a better wedding planner. But then, she tells the servants to do whatever Jesus says. I have this image of the mother of Jesus much like encouraging your child to get on the school bus for the first time: "Come on, you can do it! I know you can!" But, I also wonder what she saw in that moment. What had Jesus revealed to her up to that point that would cause her to believe that such a miracle was possible from him? How did she know that this was the time for revelation, the event of Epiphany?

The mother of Jesus appears only twice in the Gospel of John, at the wedding at Cana and at the foot of the cross. While we are not told about here about her reoccurrence later in the Gospel, we get a hint of her return in Jesus' reason for what seems to be a refusal of her request, "My hour has not yet come."

It is more than poignant that the mother of Jesus brackets his life, surrounds Jesus' earthly ministry. She is at the beginning of his career and watches him die. She is the nurturing force when he is the Word made flesh, a shared parenthood with God, the father. What difference does this make to the way we understand who Jesus is? Perhaps it might help us to remember Jesus in a manger in the midst of miracles. Perhaps it is a reminder that whenever Jesus reveals his divinity, he is simultaneously revealing something about his humanity. Perhaps, in the sign that it is water into wine, we might even experience something that we need to know about ourselves.

All week I have wondered to myself – what is it that we hold onto? What helps us to be confident in our faith? I suspect there may be many answers to this question; but I hope that we helped by the experience of coming together each Sunday around this Altar and sharing in the Eucharist together. It is an act which we share as a community, and hopefully grounds our week. It is a moment in which Jesus is revealed to us afresh, where we can be reminded of God's abundant grace, and be encouraged to notice where God is at work in our midst each day. Amen