

On Tuesday I had a wonderful treat. I received a recording from James who I met when he came to My Move play group at 6months old and just turned 8!

The recording starting 'Hello Mother Christine, today I would like to read you a story I made it myself. It can be a morning story or a bedtime story. Please tell me what you think! It is called '*the reindeer who thought he was a giraffe*'. ...he told me the story of a baby reindeer who lost his parents and so was looked after by a giraffe during a drought. The baby reindeer forgets that he is a reindeer and the other animals begin to laugh. But a friendly bear helps the reindeer remember. The story ended with 'Thank you bear for showing us who we really are!'

It was a fantastic story told with much expression. I enjoyed it very much, and listened to it in the morning and at bedtime!!

Not only was it a great story – the closing question made me think – who are the people who show us who we really are. We all learn about ourselves during the course of our lives, and there are those who help us get there.

One of the challenges of the past 12 months is that many have struggled with a sense of purpose or identity from within rolling lockdowns. Many have found themselves, but for others it is still a struggle.

I think this has been true for the church too – who are we if we are not in our building? Who are we when we are limited in the way we care for the community around us? The way we support each other, our ability to stay in touch, to keep worshipping in the face of all else that has happened this year say a lot about who we are!

During Epiphany season we are focused on the manifestation – that is our understanding of who Jesus is, and how that impacts on who we are. 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. 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 Israel¹.

The season of Epiphany actually follows the pattern of opening of each of the four gospels.

Each gospels starts with some kind of introduction, an encounter with John the Baptist, and then some form of a calling of the first disciples. And then each marks the move to Jesus' ministry by describing a particular event.

In Mark, the first thing Jesus does is cast out an unclean spirit, announcing his intention to stand against all that would keep the children of God from abundant life. In Matthew, the first major event of Jesus' public ministry is his sermon on the mount, where he teaches the crowds from the mountain and comes across as one like Moses who brought down from the mountain. In Luke, Jesus first preaches,

¹ <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/churchs-year/times-and-seasons/epiphany#mmm72>

announcing his intention to heal and feed and release the captives and bring good news to the poor². Here, in John, the first thing Jesus does is go to a wedding. And not only does he attend a wedding, he saves the day by changing water into wine!

Epiphany season, like the Gospels help us remember how we recognise who God is, and it invites us to remember, as well as explore anew, this concept of knowing and understanding who Jesus is, which in turn helps us to know God and ourselves a little better.

One of the interesting things about John's Gospel is that the miracles Jesus performs 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 but the point of the story for the Gospel writer is that it points to a clearer revelation about Jesus – help us to know who Jesus is.

I love this sign in John's Gospel, not just because it would be lovely to turn water to wine – but because of the wonderful image of abundance that this sign offers. We are expected to see and be amazed at not only the generosity of God, but how this is poured out to us – extended to us to enjoy – how we are blessed.

And this is an abundant sign - six water jars, each between 75 – 100 litres, filled to the brim, of the best wine. The amount in itself is extraordinary. But not only is there an abundance – it is also the best wine offered at the end of the wedding which has been going for more than a week – it is an unexpected generosity, which none of the guests or the hosts would have expected!³

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 of God's abundance even when we are feeling empty.

The other thing to notice in John's gospel is that Mary only appears twice, and she is never called Mary, only the Mother of Jesus⁴. She appears here at the wedding, at the very start of Jesus ministry, and then again standing at the foot of the cross at the end of his earthly ministry. Mary is the bookends in many ways of Jesus story. There is something in this structure which reminds us that Jesus was very human, however miraculous he might have been.

The challenge then is, what does this teach us about who we are, who we have potential to become in response to God's abundance towards us? And at this time, when so much around us is challenging (as it was for Mary in the time of Jesus), what is God showing us about who we really are?

² <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/01/john-21-11/>

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

⁴ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/second-common-lectionary/second-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-john-21-11-4>

In the mid seventh century there was a young gifted musician called Fanny Crosby. She is believed to have written over 5000 hymns, many of which we still enjoy today. Fanny Crosby became blind in the first year of her life, but she did not allow this to define her, instead it was her faith and music which shaped her life. She held onto the assurance that God defined who she was in the face of many challenges. One of her greatest hymns is Blessed Assurance – This is my Story, This is my Song. I am reminded of this hymn as I read John's Gospel, and as we reflect on who Jesus is, and who we are in response. It is the gift of a story of which we are a part – which helps us to know who we really are! Amen.