

Still quite early in another year, how hopeful are you feeling?

A ceasefire in Gaza? I heard one person speak of it in terms of “optimism”; another wrote that ‘ceasefire’ is “a word whispered with cautious hope”.

Two weeks ago, a columnist writing in *Church Times* (the English church paper) reported that the *Ipsos Predictions Survey 2025*, which polls expectations and predictions in 33 countries for the year ahead, revealed that despite the cost-of-living crisis, terrible conflicts around the world, unchecked climate change, most people think that the year ahead will be better than last year. The column was given the headline, “The Pollyannas are the Global Majority”. The writer said that psychologists put it down to “optimism bias”. So, he concluded his article by saying:

What all this underscores is the importance of distinguishing theologically between optimism and hope in 2025. Optimism is a fleeting human-centric expectation that life will trend toward the positive. Hope, in contrast, requires a trust in the ultimate good and also calls on us to act in accordance with that trust. Hope demands an element of resilience and agency which optimism doesn’t require. Only hope will triumph in the face of the trials of the year ahead.

Pope Francis has called for a new “diplomacy of hope” to ensure truth, forgiveness and justice.

Interestingly, this year’s Letter from the Taizé Community, written by the Prior, Br Matthew, takes up the theme of hope: *Hoping beyond all hope* is the title. In it, he writes: “Nurturing hope requires facing the reality as it is, and seeing it in the light of God’s promises”.

From John’s gospel, we have just heard of a wedding in Cana in Galilee.

The first three gospels are called the synoptic gospels because they are so alike in style and content. John’s gospel is very un-alike! In company with the others, the fourth gospel tells something of the life of Jesus, but it does so in a very different way. It is probable that the source of the gospel was the apostle John, but that the writing went through several stages of development before the final version in the last decade of the 1st century CE. We might think in terms of a ‘Johannine School’, a group of John’s disciples meditating on, and expressing ever more profoundly, the life and teachings of Jesus as they had been told by the apostle – developing a deep theological reflection on the life of Jesus.

The small Christian community to which that group belonged is generally thought to have been in Ephesus, where it would have been influenced by Greek philosophy – and this can be seen clearly in the gospel writing. But John draws primarily on the Jewish background, with the chief intention of declaring the conviction that all the faith and religious practices of Judaism – incomplete in themselves – all their hopes and longings – have been fulfilled and brought to completion in Jesus.

Consider how John uses the ‘mighty works’ of Jesus. In the other gospels, that is what they are called, and there are lots of them. In the fourth gospel, there are just seven, and they are not called ‘mighty works’ or ‘miracles’; they are called ‘signs’! They are indicators; to use a play on words, they *sign*-ify something, and what they signify is their significance. They point beyond themselves to the One responsible for them

There are seven signs in John’s gospel: water into wine; healing of the Official’s son; healing of a lame man; feeding 5000; walking on water; healing of a blind man; and the raising of a dead man, Lazarus. Seven! And remember that in the Jewish understanding, ‘seven’ is the number of completeness, of perfection. You might say that the conviction that the gospel writer is conveying is that there is nothing that does not find its completion, its perfection, in Jesus.

Our gospel story today, of a wedding in Cana, declares this to be so. Naturally, it does so in the context of Jewish religion and culture. But a truth is being declared about the significance of Jesus

that is relevant to every person in every situation – to us in our situation, to our world in its present distressing state.

We desperately need to hear a voice authentically witnessing to Jesus' message of non-judgemental acceptance, forgiveness, hospitality and love – a message of hope. He preached and practised a new way of being, a new way of thinking and acting, which he called 'the Kingdom', and he often used the image of a feast to describe it. And for him, the feast is a vast meal at which there is a place for everyone, with a priority for those whom human society rejects as outcasts.

In the first three gospels, this teaching is conveyed in many parables about a feast, most notably a wedding banquet. In the fourth gospel, there are no parables. But there are 'signs'. Indeed, the first part of John's gospel can be called the 'Book of Signs'. But then, the first sign occurs at a feast – a wedding banquet, no less. So, perhaps the story of the wedding in Cana in Galilee can be likened to a parable with Jesus as the central actor.

Notice how the writer of the story employs two uses of water – for washing and for drinking.

The water in the stone jars is for washing – for the Jewish purification rites. There are six of them. Remember: in the Jewish understanding, 'seven' is the number of completeness, perfection. 'Six' falls short: it signifies limitation, incompleteness, imperfection. The writer understands the six water-pots as standing for all the imperfection / limitation / incompleteness of the old Law, the old faith understandings and practices. Jesus is the one who transforms them.

In the fourth gospel, placed at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the truth embodied in this gospel 'sign' is that Jesus is the one who was bringing into the world and into the lives of people everywhere a completeness, a transformation, changing the whole basis of our relationship with God – from law to love. It is a transformation as profound, as absolute, as the change of water into wine. It is a transformation in which Christian hope is grounded.

At the celebratory event – a wedding feast – that marks a new beginning, a new relationship, with all the promise of new life – at such an occasion, the water set aside for the ritual use of washing for purification changes dramatically. Its use now is for drinking rather than washing, and the water – now wine – provides drink that does more than quench thirst. It becomes a symbol of the Word of God present in Jesus, the One in whom is fulfilled all that was promised in the rites and rituals of religion as well as the dreams and hopes of the people.

Jesus himself, figuratively speaking, is the 'good wine', which is left to last. The transformation of water into wine signifies that, in the person of the Christ, new life has come, a new relationship has been forged, the boundaries of our conventional world have been shattered, giving us a glimpse of a new hope.

That hope is found in the centre of this story, the guest at the banquet, who becomes the host: Jesus. It is his glory that radiates through the story from beginning to end, that gives it its force and its meaning. The extravagance, the superabundance of the wine, invites us to see that in the abundance and graciousness of Jesus' gift we catch a glimpse of the identity and character of God. It shows us, yet again, how Jesus decisively changes the way we talk about and know God. It is a transformation as profound, as absolute, as the change of water into wine. It is a transformation in which Christian hope is grounded.

The extravagance, the superabundance of the wine! With all our concerns about our troubled, distressing, violent world, rather weighed down by a sense that the circumstances are beyond us, this morning we hear a gospel story that says that just in the kind of situation where we have run out of resources to cope, the glory of the love of God is manifest in Jesus: six water-pots of water transformed into wine, up to 600 litres of it! What the gospel writer is saying to us is the love of God that comes to women and men is enough and to spare – inexhaustible, more than sufficient for every situation and need. And so, it says to us that in all our situations, in every need of life, the love (inexhaustible, unbounded) of God is there enfolding us, is there to be lived in – with the eyes of faith keen and alert to perceive it.

So, the message conveyed by this gospel 'sign' is one of transformation: The Word of God in Jesus, a word and pledge of sacrificial love, is that reality which is finally able to transform us into persons redeemed and made new. The love of God, given flesh in Jesus, is the power to transform us – like water into wine. It can transform our uncertainties and fears into the power of love, to forgive, to be hospitable, to show compassion, and to hope.