

Sunday 14 January: Second Sunday of Epiphany

“Fill the jars with water...”

Readings: Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11

Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim.

“This is a technological solution to a social problem”. Those were the words of the US medical ethicist Dr. Jeffrey Brosco in response to the case of the severely disabled little girl Ashley, whose treatment in a Seattle hospital hit the headlines recently. Ashley is nine years old, but has the mental ability of a three-month old child and cannot walk or talk. Ashley’s parents had requested that she should be given treatment to arrest her physical development and so keep her child-sized, and sexually immature. They and the doctors who carried out the treatment argued that the central purpose of the treatment was to improve the quality of Ashley’s life and to enable her more easily to receive the care that she needs to keep her comfortable.

The response to the news was understandably mixed. The immediate reaction of many was horror and disgust. One of the doctors involved in the treatment was quoted as saying that in assessing such cases we must put aside such emotional responses in order to confront the real issues involved in ethical decision making. Others like Jeffrey Brosco whose words I quoted earlier pointed to the real issue being a social problem in the provision of appropriate support - financial, practical and emotional - given to families and individuals who are bearing the burden of care for loved ones. And the Disability Rights Commission in the UK backed up such a view with statistics that showed in this country half of families with disabled children live in poverty, are often in debt and many describe themselves as being at breaking point. *“When parents face such trying circumstances,” they said “it is small wonder that they consider desperate measures”*.

If I’m honest, I think my gut reaction to the news of Ashley’s treatment was probably in the horror and disgust category, and I’ve found myself struggling since to find a clear perspective on it. I thank God that I am not in the terrible position that Ashley’s parents find themselves; and I know that free from the direct emotional involvement, and the unbearable conflicts they must face, it would be all too easy to stand in judgement. I can’t go along with the doctor who says we must put emotional responses aside, but I also found myself asking, praying and reflecting on where and how the perspective of my faith illuminates or gives insight to those emotional responses.

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The familiar story of the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee doesn’t at first sight seem an obvious place to start. And yet in the past week or so as I tried to pray my way through my response to the story of Ashley, and to some of the other ethical dilemmas that seem to challenge fundamental concepts of the worth of human life, what it says about that very basic question has been astoundingly relevant.

As with so much of John’s gospel, what you see is not what you get. This story could be read as the story of a wonder worker producing something like 120 gallons of wine to turn an ordinary wedding into the mother of all parties. Ethicists might even say that in producing this

much wine to cover the embarrassment of the bridegroom and his family, Jesus too was providing a technological solution to a social problem.

It could be read in that way, but what you get instead is layer upon layer of meaning, every phrase carrying hidden potential, subtle visions of truth, tantalising glimpses of glory, colourful kaleidoscopes of light, and above all, when thinking about those fundamental questions of human worth, infinite possibilities of transformation.

“Fill the jars with water”... is one such phrase loaded with all the extraordinary qualities of this amazing Gospel. Water is one of its recurring themes. John tells of water in wells and pools, springs and lakes, pots and basins, quenching thirst, washing feet and flowing from the side of the crucified Christ. In all of these ways John points to water as a symbol for the raw material of human nature. *“Fill the jars with water”*.. says Jesus – asking for more of our human nature not less. *“Fill the jars with water... Now draw some out.”*. Jesus asks for the whole of ourselves, every part of our flesh and blood, spirit and soul, emotional response, rational intelligence and untapped intuition to be open to the transforming possibilities of the Spirit; to be open to the new order of creation that will be revealed on the third day.

The stone pots that hold the water are, John tells us, those used in the Jewish rites of purification. They are, we might think, part of the old order, something to be swept away. Instead, here Jesus uses them – they too hold the possibility of transformation but only when they are filled to the brim, and laid open to that possibility.

“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory”.

Glory is another enduring theme of John’s Gospel. In this sign, Jesus reveals something of his fundamental nature – something of what he was and is and something of his infinite worth shone out in this sign, this act of transformation.

Reflecting on the story of Ashley in the light of those images from John’s Gospel, I was reminded of the words of the German theologian, Helmut Thielicke who said:

“The incommensurable, incalculable worth of human life does not reside in any immanent quality of human beings, but in the fact that we are created and redeemed by God”. In other words, Thielicke argued, our glory lies not in any intrinsic quality of our human lives, but in the relationship to which we called as beloved and redeemed children of God.

Which for me lends weight to the argument that the real scandal in the story of Ashley lies in our inability as a society to affirm the worth of each human being by providing the care and support to enable all people to live their lives as fully as possible. The real scandal lies in masking the social ills of dehumanising poverty and powerlessness with the false promises of technological expertise operating in a vacuum of human emotion and instinct.

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In a few moments, we, in the symbolism of water, will affirm the infinite worth of Oscar as a child of God. We will, in the promises made by his parents, godparents and each one of us, lay open before God the fullness of his life, flesh and blood, spirit and soul, that in the death and resurrection of Jesus, it too may be transformed and the glory of Oscar as the beloved of God may be made known. And in our prayers and support for Oscar and his family, we express our hope and belief, that as he grows, he may know the reality of that transforming presence throughout his life.

*Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim.
“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his
disciples believed in him.”*