

St James' Wulfstan Way, Epiphany 3, 20 Jan 2013

Sophie Maggs, Ordinand at Ridley Hall

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 62.1-5

Psalms 36.5-10

1 Corinthians 12.1-11

John 2.1-11 (*Wedding at Cana*)

Our gospel passage about Jesus at the Wedding of Cana has made me wonder: What does grace taste like? Could I describe the taste of grace to someone who had not tasted it before?

Perhaps 'to taste' seems a strange verb to use to describe our experience of God's grace. What if I asked you to describe the taste of something you had eaten or drunk? If you were to remember the last time you drank a glass of wine, how would you describe the taste to me? I tend to look on the label of the bottle for some clues. I drank some wine this week which described itself as having "Rich, ripe plum and dark berry aromas, with hints of cherry and raspberry over savoury, smoky oak". I'm happy to say that it tasted rather better than it sounds!

But could I describe to you (without looking at a label) the wine that I drank last weekend? Or the weekend before that? When I ask myself these questions, I realise that perhaps my taste buds are not quite as discerning as I would like to think. Someone has got me thinking about these questions, and that someone is the chief steward that we read about in our gospel passage today. The chief steward has been taking part in the wedding celebrations and drinking the wine that had been provided by the bridegroom. As far as we know, he has made no particular comment about that wine. But when he tastes the wine that Jesus has provided, he feels compelled to offer congratulations. If you were at a wedding, how good would the wine have to

be for you to go the bridegroom and congratulate him on it?! It must have tasted very remarkable.

Without knowing it, the steward had tasted the grace of Jesus, who had provided such incredible wine. And so I'm now going to return to my original question - what does grace taste like? The passage gives us some clues. First, the grace of Jesus tastes good. It is more than good - it is very good, it is surprisingly good. This is what Jesus' grace is like: **it is very good**.

Second, grace, like this wine, is often unexpected. The chief steward wasn't expecting such good wine. One of my tutors at Ridley describes God's grace as "surprising kindness". In providing such good wine, Jesus showed these newlyweds and their family and friends "surprising kindness". The steward had been expecting 'ordinary' good wine, but to his surprise he received something much better. This is what Jesus' grace is like: **he surprises us**.

Third, Jesus is unnecessarily generous with his grace. Jesus didn't *have* to provide such good wine. He could have provided something similar to the wine they'd had before. Also, he didn't have to provide so *much* wine. Six stone jars filled with 20-30 gallons of wine in my (very rough) estimation works out at about 300-500 glasses per jar, and about 2,000-3,000 glasses in total (and that's if the wine was drunk undiluted). It sounds as though Jesus provided for one wedding enough wine for a whole year of parties! In the same way, Jesus didn't have to offer his life so that we could know God. Jesus didn't have to promise to be with us always, or to provide for all our needs. But he did. This is what Jesus' grace is like: he is unnecessarily and abundantly **generous**.

So when we experience the very good, surprising and generous kindness of Jesus, we are tasting his grace. Here is an example: I tasted grace recently through the surprising kindness of a fellow ordinand at Ridley. I had been invited to dinner by a friend who lives about 20 mins away by car. When I went out to my car to drive to the dinner, my car refused to start. When my

fellow ordinand heard she very generously drove me to the meal and dropped me off, even though she had not been invited and had other plans of her own to arrange.

I wonder what stories you can tell about your experiences of other people sharing God's grace with you. I wonder how you responded to their gift of grace. How did I respond to my ordinand friend? I actually felt rather awkward. I was very tempted to feel rather undeserving and to worry that I'd inconvenienced her. Grace can cause us to feel like that because it is so generous. It seems too much. But it is so good! So how can we get better at responding to grace?

Let's look again at the example given to us by the chief steward. It's interesting that he notices this very good wine even though he's been drinking other wines that day: which means that he's aware: he notices flavour. He has well-functioning taste buds: he can tell when wine is good. And he appreciates and enjoys the wine. And we can do the same with grace. Jesus invites us, like the steward, to notice and appreciate his grace, and to allow ourselves to be surprised. He invites us to receive his generosity and to enjoy it.

This is easier said than done. If you're like me, you'll know that it's very easy to forget about grace - or not to notice it in the first place. When I read this story of the Wedding at Cana, I wonder how many of the guests noticed the new wine. John doesn't tell us. I imagine that some people might have been engrossed in conversation and might not have properly tasted the wine they were drinking because their attention was elsewhere. But perhaps some people might have been like the chief steward and noticed this new very good wine and really enjoyed it. So how can we be more like the steward? How can we remind ourselves to be continually looking out for God's surprising kindness?

One way we can be reminded is as we receive the bread and wine of the Eucharist each Sunday. Each Sunday we pray a prayer of preparation, which reminds us to turn to God, and make ourselves ready to receive from Him. Let us remember that it is very *good* to come together to share in the body and blood of Christ. When we receive these holy things we remember and receive Jesus' very good gift of himself to us on the cross. It is easy to become used to receiving the Eucharist. Let us remember how *surprising* it is that God should invite us to receive from Him and that he should give Himself to us in such a simple and tangible way. Let us also remember through the Eucharist how extraordinarily *generous* He is towards us. The Eucharist is continually celebrated here and across the global Church, week after week. This is a reminder for us that Jesus pours out his grace on us continually and generously, and that he always has more than enough grace for us, whatever difficulties we may be experiencing. God's good, surprising and generous grace is so good, surprising and generous that we need to give ourselves the time and space to consider and to receive, and we can do that each time we receive the Eucharist.

Having received and experienced God's grace, we are then called to respond. The chief steward responded by giving praise: he praised the person who he thought had provided the wine. And in the liturgy of the Eucharist, we do the same - except that unlike the steward, we *know* the One who provides the wine! So we praise him when we say "Father of all, we give you thanks and praise, that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home". We also pray, "Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory". Having received God's grace, we commit ourselves to be people who share His grace with others. May we today and every day be reminded of the very good, surprising and generous grace that Jesus offers us.