**19th January 2025**

**Call to worship**

As we receive, so may we give:
to the God who loves us,
let us give our love;
to the God who pours out his heart for us,
let us pour out our hearts in worship.

**A gathering prayer**

Like guests at a wedding feast,
we have come from far and near
to join in this family celebration.
The gifts we bring are ourselves –
our hearts and minds and souls and strength,
to share with God and each other in love.
It is a bring-and-share celebration
of God’s union with the world.
Let us feast and rejoice together,
in God’s abundant love.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

Lord, your abundant love calls us here.
Your faithfulness to all of creation brings us to our knees.
Your righteousness is higher than the highest points
and deeper than the deepest depths.
To you we come, to you we pray, this and every day.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
we marvel at all you have been through the generations,
all you are to us now
and all we trust you will be in the future.
As your Word unfolds, we find ourselves kneeling before you
in body, mind and spirit, in awe of your goodness and majesty.
We stand in awe of the way your Spirit transforms and transports us.
God Almighty, we adore you.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

We confess to you our moments of doubt, of inaction,
of falling short of what we know we can be;
moments when we have been unwilling to help others
because it was easier not to or we couldn’t be bothered.
In this moment of silence, we reflect on our failings and
seek your forgiveness …
Lord God Almighty, forgive us we pray.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

The Lord hears our prayer, never falters or wavers,
but forgives us our sins, our failings, our faults
and sends us on our way as forgiven people.
Thanks be to God.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of thanksgiving**

Creator God, we give you thanks for the world’s resources,
that feed and nurture, sustain and uphold us.
For the fruits of land and sea, for air, rain and sun.
For all around that inspires, teaches
and brings us to new depths of love and care.
We give you thanks for variety in what we see and hear, feel and taste.
We give you thanks for those we encounter on the paths of life:
for family and friends who guide and teach,
please us and annoy us;
for strangers who welcome us, care for us,
change us and widen our horizons.
We give thanks for your Word, your calling
and the abundance of who you are.
We acknowledge that we do not always repay you
with our loyalty, love and obedience.
Yet you are still our God and we are your people.
Thanks be to you.
**Amen.**

It’s time to celebrate, time to party.
Come, see Jesus, the one who delights us,
the one who delights in us, the one whose miraculous grace
can change us into something beautiful.

 **A simple worship activity W E S A**

**Recognise and respond to God’s generosity**

**You will need:** recording of ‘[Goodness of God](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-f4MUUMWMV4)’, ‘How great thou art’ or another suitable song; images of abundance in nature.

* You might want to do this activity before taking your collection. While the music is gently played, project a series of images of abundant provision for human need in  nature – e.g. fields and orchards ready for harvest; market stalls laden with produce; waterfalls – concluding with a picture of a table piled high for a feast, followed  by a food bank. Each image should bear the words of Psalm 36:8.
* Pray:
Loving God, your generosity is overflowing.
When we have more than we need,
may we share generously.

**All-year Valentine W E S**

**Marvel at the greatness of God’s love**

**You will need:** folded A5 cards; materials to decorate, e.g. colouring pens, pencils, old magazines, glue.

* Distribute folded A5 cards and decorating materials. Ask for ‘over the top’ responses to the question, ‘How much do you love me?’, e.g. ‘To the moon and back’.
* Invite people to: write ‘I love you’ plus some of these examples, or their own, inside the card; draw a heart on the front, plus the words ‘An all-year Valentine’; and write  on the back, ‘From God to…’ and their name. Remind people that the psalm and Gospel express God’s abundant love.
* Ask people to take the cards home as a reminder of God’s abundant love, or to hang on to them to give to someone in a few weeks on Valentine’s Day!

**Something out of nothing E A**

**Create an image of abundance**

**You will need:** a collection of rubbish destined for recycling (cardboard, cartons, plastic bottles, etc); glue; scissors.

* Remind everyone that Jesus turned water (an everyday substance) into wine that never ran out – an image of God’s overflowing, abundant love.
* Divide people into small groups and give them a pile of recycling to use to create an image of God’s abundance.

**Expect the unexpected W E S**

**Is our vision of God’s abundance limited?**

**You will need:** [water-jar shapes](https://www.rootsontheweb.com/media/27890/cy-expect-the-unexpected-19-jan.pdf) (one per person); pens.

* What might have gone through Mary’s mind when she told Jesus about the wine? What did she expect? On a flip chart showing a picture of Mary, write suggestions in  thought bubbles round her.
* Although we should beware of praying out of greed rather than need, is there a danger of expecting too little of God? Give everyone a water-jar shape and a pen and ask  them to write down a prayer for God’s abundance, e.g. in a personal situation, for your community, the world or planet. Invite them to bring their ‘jars’ forward and to  place them on your table or another focal point, then lead the prayer below.

Psalm 36:5-10

Accompany this reading with actions (see below) performed by a small group beside the reader, and invite the congregation to follow their lead.

v.5: stretch high

v.6: stretch wide for the mountains and dive down for the ‘great deep’; for the humans and animals, stretch one arm out to he congregation then another to the windows, indicating the creatures outside.

v.7: extend rounded, sheltering arms to the congregation

v.8: cup hands as if holding a drink or food and extend towards the congregation

v.9: with palms together ‘shoot’ arms upwards for the fountain then open them out wide for its spray and the light.

As a bridge between hearing the two readings, you could sing the song ‘Jesus’ love is very wonderful’ after the psalm and invite the congregation to join in with actions for high, low and wide.

John 2:1-11

In this well-known story it is possible to miss the sheer volume of extra wine created by transforming the six jars full of water. Each held 20 or 30 gallons, which equates to 91 to 136 litres, or 160 to 240 pints, so they might well have been as tall as an adult. To indicate this, create six cardboard cut-out jars – as large as you can make them. To emphasise key points in the reading, each jar could bear significant words relating to the verse being read as they are brought forward: Wedding; No wine; 20 or 30 gallons; Water; Wine; Best.

At intervals during the reading, have these jar outlines carried forward and held on either side of the reader by the person carrying them. They should face the written phrase on their ‘jar’ towards the congregation. The effect should be of gradually crowding the reader. The reader can acknowledge this by looking apprehensively at each new jar as it arrives. The last jar should complete a wall in front of the reader, so they have to shout the final lines of the passage from behind it.

**John 2.1-11**

**Sermon**

Sunday's lectionary gospel reading has Jesus turning up to a party that turns out for him to be a work event with wine. We are not told how long he stays, but obviously long enough to make a difference. This is a remarkable example of Bring Your Own Booze. Nobody is quite sure what happens, but it gets discussed and debated for ages afterwards.

And what a party. This isn’t just turning a bottle of water into wine but 6 stone jars each holding 80 to 120 litres. That’s anything from 500 to over 600 litres of wine. You could have a bath in it. You could swim in it. I know most of the village would probably have been at the wedding but that’s still a lot of booze.

In my older version of my bible, it gave the total in gallons – 20 to 30 gallons.

I remember my kids asking what are gallons? Remember when you bought petrol in gallons. I remember my dad sucking his teeth when the price went over £1 a gallon. It would be just under £7 a gallon now.

A swimming pool of wine. The moral of the story is: invite Jesus to your party.

It is a shocking story.

Joan Kingham, one of our great church stalwarts, a pillar of this church for several decades, who died at the age of 99 seven years ago, was an ardent tee totaller. She was brought up at a time when the Temperance movement was strong and militant, when there was great concern at the turn to alcohol by many who had lived through the trauma of the Great War and were drowning their sorrows in drink. The movement was largely led by churchgoers and women, who were concerned for their safety and security at home as their menfolk were spending all the hard-earned money on booze and getting into the grip of that terrible addiction. It is still a social problem today of course. Sadly, our society doesn’t know how to enjoy itself and have fun, without the aid of alcohol. It is prevalent in culture: having a good time involves consuming alcohol – that is the tie up.

Joan stood in opposition for many years against this church being licensed to serve alcohol at events. I used to pull her leg about this story of the wedding feast at Cana.

‘But Joan Jesus turned water into wine’ I said. ‘Yes, I don’t approve’ she replied

But not just water into wine. Lots of it. Enough to swim in it. ‘Shocking’ she tutted.

It is shocking.

What is John trying to say in writing this story?

It’s the first sign in John’s Gospel, one of several where John is keen to show that Jesus is in fact the Messiah, the one who will mark the restoration of God’s relationship with the people of Israel and bring blessing to the whole world. John is big on signs - they are important to him. Scholars argue how many there are in his Gospel, six, seven or eight, but we kick off here at the wedding and go through healing and walking on water and feeding the five thousand before quite a climax with bringing Lazarus back to life.

This is a sign of transformation and change, from something plain and ordinary like water into something extraordinary and a blessing: wine.

The themes for this week centre on the abundance of God. The glorious and most unjustified gift of new life comes from the person and work of Jesus. How can we, as Christians, follow Christ’s example of abundant generosity? In what ways are we scandalously generous, offering more to others than is necessary?. Our acts of kindness can operate as signs, pointing beyond themselves to the one who is ultimately generous.

A man once gave an example of how being more generous liberated he and his wife from anxiety about money. He described how they had been waiting to pay their fee at the booth on a toll road. They decided they would pay for the person behind as well. This led them to incorporate ‘random acts of kindness’ into their everyday lives. They did this simply in obedience to the command ‘love your neighbour as yourself’. They were not expecting any thanks or return. However, they did experience an unexpected benefit. As they pursued this campaign of little generosities, they were liberated from their financial anxieties. And although they were not showered with wealth, they always had as much money as they needed.

Compare that attitude to the richest men on the planet.

If Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckenberg used their wealth to eradicate poverty and homelessness they probably would still have some spare change left over….

What I find interesting with this sign is that in taking six stone jars filled with between 20-30 gallons of everyday water and turning them into the finest wine, not only is Jesus turning the ordinary into the extraordinary and doing something wildly extravagant, but this miracle goes largely unseen. Only the servants who fetch the water and bring the wine and the disciples know. In fact the steward compliments the bridegroom, the praise goes not where it is earned at all.

Turning the ordinary into the extraordinary is happening week in week out with bags on doorsteps, with flowers that are their own kind of sign that you are loved, you are not forgotten, surplus food blessing our community for free a hub with welcoming faces who will make you a free cup of coffee and listen to how you are doing and if you are in need try to help..

We are literally taking that which is destined for the bin and turning it into a blessing.

Of course it isn’t as simple as that, there are no doubt times when the food isn’t great or fitting and the volunteers are left with a few blackened bananas and a load of cardboard for their own bins, but in a general sense, I believe, something extraordinary is happening.

There were a couple of things here that I thought we could reflect on.

One is a question about unseen blessings, what blessings, what abundance do we need to turn our hearts and eyes and ears too? What of God’s work do we fail to see or perhaps even take for granted?

What riches do we overlook because our senses are numbed like those inebriated guests at the wedding?

 And my second thought is, as we embark on a new year as we look to a new vision, to what extent do we make sure it’s Jesus, not the Bridegroom that gets the glory, that it’s God, not the person who brings the bag of surplus food to a door that gets the thanks?

Jesus performed signs that were much more public and risky – raising Lazarus is sure to have focused the intent of the Temple authorities to obliterate this upstart from Nazareth – how overtly do we want to point to the source of our inspiration?

When you are part of a church it is humbling to be involved in something that is clearly much greater than the sum of its parts. Where Jesus is, there is transformation, sometimes its obvious, often less so, but as disciples we get to glimpse what others, like the guests at the wedding, don’t. What do we do about that?

At the end of Chapter 20 in John’s Gospel the author writes: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” John 20:31. What signs can we be?

We are all walking billboards for Jesus. Signs of the transformation he has brought to our lives. How can we encourage others to be open to consider the difference Jesus could make to their lives?

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In this passage from John’s gospel, we read about Jesus taking some very ordinary ingredients (water, a wedding celebration) and transforming them into something extraordinary – not only the best of wine, but an image of God’s generous hospitality.

It counters people’s preconceptions of what the life of faith is all about. Namely if you are a Christian, you are boring, judgmental, and wary of having any fun.

Twenty-four years ago on 13th January 2001 I became the minister of this church. Not many of you here now were there then. I have conducted the funerals of over ninety members of this church over those 24 years. We have lost some great souls who made a great contribution to our church life. But thanks be to God the Spirit has also been at work transforming this church, bringing new growth new challenges and new blessings. And we place our trust in God as we go forward to continue his transformation of us.

Before I was inducted, I was interviewed by the local press. The reporter, an Aston Villa fan I seem to remember, the reporter asked me what did I hope to do in Dursley. I instinctively replied ‘I want to have some fun’.

The headline of the article on page two of the Gazette ran ‘Minister just wants to have fun.’

The Moderator of the Synod, the nearest I have to a boss, questioned me about my attitude. I had to clarify my remarks at the induction service.

It is fun following Jesus. You never know what will happen next. You can expect the unexpected. You must remain open for miracles to happen. You can dream big and live large. You need open hearts to laugh with those who laugh and cry with those who cry. If you share Christ’s heart it will be costly. You will give and not count the cost. It will make you generous when your human nature will tend to make you fearful and protective. It will make you stand up against injustice and unrighteousness when you would rather remain seated and quiet in the corner and not get involved. It will make you exhausted because the world isn’t right, and you have signed on for Christ’s work in redeeming this mess. But it will be fun. Even when its challenging.

Mary knows this. In the story when the party runs out of wine, she turns to Jesus in expectation and perhaps a knowing wink. ‘They have no more wine’ she says.

I don’t know who you turn to when you are in need, or you see a need. Our society promotes us to be independent. We turn to ourselves. We have to get through. We have to remain strong. We have to sort our own problems out. And we can take pride in that when we do so. Well, there are some truths in that – we do need to take responsibility and do what we can.

And yet…. No man is an island, as the saying goes.

And Jesus is in the room.

‘What are we going to do? Can you help?’ There’s no more wine Jesus? There’s no more…. Fill in the blank for yourself. It’s a simple prayer. Stumble over your own pride and ask it.

The response of Jesus to Mary is hard to read. Woman, why do you involve me?” . “My hour has not yet come.”

Translators say the word for woman does not denotate any disrespect. But we have no idea of the tone of voice of this verse. Is it that sigh you get from your children from time to time: ‘Oh mother!’ stop fussing, stop bothering me, here we go again’.

Mary knows her son though. She tells the servants ‘Do whatever he tells you’. She knows that Jesus doesn’t turn down a request. She knows Jesus will help when people turn to him. She knows Jesus has a good heart.

Jesus turns up not any wine, but the best wine. Chateau Latour come is at £14K a bottle!

The master of the banquet says to the bridegroom (not Jesus – who should have got the credit) ‘*Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.’*

Listen, confession time. There have been a number of occasions when I have had too much to drink. Usually always I have regretted it the following day. The most notorious moment was my fiftieth birthday. We had gathered my family and Debbie’s family in a hotel in Nottingham, reliving old memories as that was where we first met. We had a meal on the Saturday night and then the parents decided to retire for the evening leaving the rest of us to hit the town. Basically, it was survival of the fittest after that. It ended up with me and my brother, God rest his soul, and the kids wandering off to the famous Old Trip to Jerusalem pub to sample their whiskies. Except that they wouldn’t let Sam and Libby in because they were underage. So instead of walking them back to the hotel as any responsible parent would have, Andrew and I just waved them off to fend for themselves in Nottingham city centre at midnight, whilst we went through their whisky selection.

Anyway, we faced the music the following morning. Everyone had come down to breakfast and were eating heartily when my brother and I appeared, the worst for wear, walking the walk of shame down the breakfast aisle. ‘Just a slice of toast please and a black coffee’, we said hanging our head in shame.

Imagine that you’ve had too much to drink and then the best drinks come out!

This is what is happening here in this party. The best is yet to come.

John is writing this to call to mind the Old Testament promises of the feasting and drinking that will characterize the (messianic) age to come.’1 It is appropriate to link to today’s reading from Isaiah (also see Isaiah 25:6-8).

*On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
    a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine –
    the best of meats and the finest of wines.****7****On this mountain he will destroy
    the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;****8****he will swallow up death for ever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears
    from all faces;
he will remove his people’s disgrace
    from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken.*

The biblical allusion is to the end of time when God will right all wrongs, restore justice and bring to fruition the kingdom of heaven.

Do not think that when you go to heaven you will be playing your harp and floating on a cloud. It will be a party. It will be fun.

All this nonsense about the Devil having all the good music and better down there than up there – don’t’ believe it – a pack of lies – from the Father of all lies – another name for the Devil. Lies.

I know so many men who won’t entertain faith, or following Jesus because its not manly, its boring, its restrictive, its not fun, its no challenge, etc etc. I don’t know what Bible they have read. But it’s the greatest adventure you could possibly imagine.

To love the unlovely, to seek justice and mercy and to walk humbly with God – awesome. Get drunk on that.

And some of you may be feeling – well I’ve done my bit. I’ve earned my crust. I’m tired now. Not much to look forward to. Down hill from here on end.

Folks the best wine was saved till last. The best wine is coming.

You have saved the best till now.

In an unobtrusive way, Jesus here declares his messianic intentions. The ‘new wine’ is the eschatological abundance that we read about in the Old Testament and finds its fruition in Jesus Christ

What about you? Ready to risk something extraordinary happening in your life. Ready for some real fun, some remarkable transformation?

Let’s get the party started.

**Prayers of intercession**

For the places where you are already at work to bring transformation in people’s lives.
For the sharing of many gifts to build up our church communities.
For the surprise of promises fulfilled beyond what we imagined.

For the signs of your glory in the ordinary things of life
**All: Give us thankful hearts and hear our prayers.**

For the amazing beauty of creation and the fantastic abundance of living things.
For recognition of our dependence on nature and for the work needed to  protect the delicate balance of ecosystems.
For flowers, fauna and fish; for animals and birds; reptiles and insects and all creatures in all their diversity and uniqueness.

For the signs of your glory in the ordinary things of life
**All: Give us thankful hearts and hear our prayers.**

For restrained and simple living that honours the earth’s finite resources and the determination to change our lives.
For all who confront the vested interests of fossil fuel companies and challenge climate science denial.
For the political will to control our emissions and end our ceaseless consumption, and for healthy debate in Parliament on the Climate and Nature Bill.

For the signs of your glory in the ordinary things of life
**All: Give us thankful hearts and hear our prayers.**

For the lost and lonely; for the sick; the disturbed and the despairing; that all will know your light and your life.
For ourselves, that our longing to see the kingdom you promise would lead us to action.
For the bright hope of a world where all find safety, home and security, and for renewed commitment to bring it closer to reality.

For the signs of your glory in the ordinary things of life
**All: Give us thankful hearts and hear our prayers.**

For people who pour out their love or place themselves in danger to make our lives better.
For the people we know whose gifts quietly transform lives and serve the need in our communities.
For the dreamers, poets, protesters and prophets of our world and their challenge to us to live more faithfully and generously for you.

For the signs of your glory in the ordinary things of life
**All: Give us thankful hearts and hear our prayers.**

For fragile signs of peace in the Middle East amongst old hatreds and years of mistrust.
For all delicate negotiations that build bridges between communities and make peace possible; and for the ability to resolve conflict and live in peace where we are.
For the persistence of hope in the midst of devastation and for the renewal of the fire-scorched, war-torn and famine-ravaged areas of our world.

For the signs of your glory in the ordinary things of life
**All: Give us thankful hearts and hear our prayers.**

For moments of beauty that fill us with gratitude and hope, and for the first snowdrop of spring in the midst of frozen earth.
For life that pushes its way into the light in spite of the struggle.
For signs of growth in our communities and for people who encourage us in our day-to-day faith.

For the signs of your glory in the ordinary things of life
**All: Give us thankful hearts and hear our prayers.**

For the feast of love to which all are invited and the taste of your goodness in the here and now.
For the water of life you offer us and the promise that you will satisfy our thirst.
For your love that calls us daily and fills our hands with more gifts than we can hold.

For the signs of your glory in the ordinary things of life
**All: Give us thankful hearts and hear our prayers.**

**A prayer for all ages together**

Generous God,
**your love is overflowing:**
may we be generous beyond expectation.
Generous God,
**your love is overflowing:**
may we use what you give us wisely.
Generous God,
**your love is overflowing:**
may we never underestimate your generosity.
Generous God,
**your love is overflowing:**
it surrounds us every day.
Generous God,
**your love is overflowing:**
we thank you with overflowing hearts.

**A sending out prayer**

At the wedding at Cana,
Mary saw there was a problem.
She told Jesus about it and he responded
with unexpectedly abundant generosity.
May we have eyes that see the needs of others,
a faith that expects Jesus to help,
and the confidence to pester him in prayer.
**Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

May Jesus Christ,
changer of water into wine,
taker of the ordinary in our lives,
transform us for his glory,
and make us extraordinary for his sake.
Let us go out from here
with God’s miraculous grace brimming up inside us,
taking with us that abundance of love and power,
and sharing it with everyone we meet.
**Amen.**