

*Bread to eat — how pleasant it is!  
But how can a meal taste good to the palate  
When the wineglass  
Is filled with water<sup>1</sup>*

That's a poem from a Spanish Jewish writer of the Middle Ages – and it leads me to begin with the thought that this morning's gospel story would be all the better for a little understanding of the Jewish view of drinking wine! What did the guests at the wedding at Cana in Galilee think about the whole business of wine?

The teachers of the day – the rabbis – believed that there were “two sides of the flagon”.<sup>2</sup> In other words, like us, they believed that wine could be bad or could be good.

They rejected the suggestion that one should abstain from wine and meat as a sign of mourning for the destruction of the Temple, on the grounds that such a decree would impose unbearable hardship on the public. They even went so far as to suggest that wine would be served at the eschatological banquet to be held at the End of Times.

The rabbis, known to have enjoyed the pleasures of imbibing, even claimed that wine drinking was beneficial to one's health and to one's mental sharpness. At the same time, the rabbis recognized and warned against the dangers inherent in excessive drinking.

- Wine reddens the face of the wicked in this world and whitens it in the next.
- The Levites only sing when wine is poured [on the altar]
- When wine enters, reason escapes
- Rav Judah said in the name of Samuel, that if a judge drank a glass of wine, he should give no decision on that day.
- Avoid wine, avoid sin
- Old wine benefits one's eyes, heart and intestines.

Twice over the years in this church, once in a Lenten series and on another occasion in the Book Group, we have sat down and watched the film “Babettes Feast”.<sup>3</sup>

This drama, placed in a desolate and tiny village on the Jutland Peninsula in Denmark is about two sisters, the daughters of the local Lutheran pastor, who carry on after his death the pastoral care of the elderly and call together the community weekly in prayer and Bible study.

And then Babette arrives in their household as the cook. She comes from Paris – and begins in small ways to change the eating habits of the household. Smoked fish and bread begin to be livened up by this remarkable woman.

But there is trouble in the community. Trouble and past sadness too.

One of the sisters has already been sought after by two men both rejected by her father and sent packing. Two old friends tell each other what they really think about one another. A husband and wife get into a big row. And this close little Lutheran group is becoming divided.

---

<sup>1</sup> Solomon b. Judah Ibn Gabirol of Cordova (c1021-1058)

<sup>2</sup> Jewish Heritage Magazine – Talmudic Sayings. <http://www.jhom.com/topics/wine/talmud.htm> (although later, of course, than Jesus, the quotes do point towards the tenor of Jewish thought.)

<sup>3</sup> *Babettes gæstebud* 1987 dir. Gabriel Axel

And then Babette wins the National Lottery. She tells the sisters that she wants to provide a banquet-a feast. And she does!

"Potage à la Tortue" (turtle soup); "Blini Demidoff au Caviar" (buckwheat cakes with caviar and sour cream); "Caille en Sarcophage avec Sauce Perigourdine" (quail in puff pastry shell with foie gras and truffle sauce); "La Salad" featuring Belgian endive and walnuts in a vinaigrette; and "Les Fromages" featuring Blue Cheese, papaya, figs, grapes and pineapple. The grand finale dessert is "Savarin au Rhum avec des Figs et Fruit Glacée" (rum sponge cake with figs and glacéed fruits). Numerous rare wines, including Clos de Vougeot along with various champagnes and spirits, complete the menu.<sup>4</sup>

Babette's purchase of the finest china, flatware, crystal and linens with which to set the table ensures that the luxurious food and drink is served in a style worthy of Babette, who is none other than the famous former Chef of Café Anglais. Babette's previous occupation has been unknown to the sisters until she confides in them after the meal.

This story of Jesus and the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee has been subjected to many theological interpretations. The symbolism comes thick and fast. But just for today let's keep it very simple. We have a generous God. A God who wants us to have all good things. A God who wants us to have abundance. (Which in itself calls into judgement the ways of this world when we look at the terrible poverty of a place like Haiti – even before the horrors of Tuesday's earthquake.)

When Jesus was a guest at the small town wedding in Galilee and they were a little short of wine. Jesus did not just provide a little wine. He found six of the biggest water jars available and while he was at it, he provided about 150 gallons of wine.

You might say why couldn't Jesus have found something more worthy for this his first ever recorded miracle? Why couldn't he have intervened in some of the many political conflicts of the time and put an end to war? Why couldn't he have done something with the world's food supply and put an end to world hunger? Why even couldn't he have changed the seismic patterns of the earth? Why did he choose a small town wedding where he had to provide some more wine? These people had been partying for days and they had probably had enough to drink already. Why does Jesus choose to provide wine at a rural wedding when he would reveal his glory?

One clue, I think, is to be repeated in Babette's Feast – it is in being treated with abundance that we learn to be abundant. And another clue is in what happens to the wine. This is counter-intuitive. You would think, wouldn't you, that the wine brought out in such circumstances could get away with being poorer quality. Inferior!

Far from it. What is offered is the very best. Vintage, highest quality! יין המשמר (yayin ham'shumar)

There is no half-measure, no skimping, no watering down in the enormous truth of that God is doing for us in Christ Jesus. His mercy and saving grace are beyond description. And poured upon us with all the wild profligacy of love. And that is the gospel to which we are called. That is the God who welcomes us home.

---

<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babette's\\_Feast](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babette's_Feast)