

‘Out of the blue – offers that make a difference’: Sermon for Epiphany 3 by Mark Pilgrim

The location is Jutland in Denmark. The time is the 1840's. Two sisters are trying to lead their small village according to the clear, firm Christian principles laid down by their recently deceased father. The atmosphere is similar to the puritan Wee Free communities of Scotland. Everything is very measured and sober. The whole community gathers for worship and teaching regularly and together. As the sisters struggle to maintain the traditions and wellbeing of the community, out of the blue a stranger seeks refuge with them during a storm. This stranger, a French woman, is so glad to be helped that she asks to stay. Helping as the sisters' maid, she gradually learns to speak Danish and becomes increasingly important to the sisters as they become frailer.

14 years go by and the community is aware that the 100th anniversary of their founder's birth is approaching. How should they celebrate this event so significant to their community? Their leaders are struggling. The whole project is in peril of completely unravelling. Even the oldest members of the community are backsliding and bickering. They need to return and be brought together again through the Christian faith that their community was founded on.

As the date of the 100th anniversary of their founder's birth draws near, the quiet French maid asks the sisters for permission to return to Paris for a short while. They grant it. When she returns the whole community is amazed to see she is accompanied by vast quantities of food and wine, the like of which they have never ever seen in their lives.

The maid sets to and, in the confines of the sisters' house, prepares the most sumptuous feast. The sisters are alarmed but decide that ignorance is bliss. If they don't ask questions they won't be sure what is happening. And if they don't know what is actually happening they can face their community more easily if they don't like what is happening.

The great day arrives. Out of the blue the nephew of the community's local wealthy patron is included in the feast. The feast is laid before 12 elders and honoured guests. It consists of course after course of succulent French food and wine. The locals are bemused. How are they to eat – what are they to make of such rich and colourful fare? It is left to the worldly, outsider Cavalry Officer to identify what they are eating. The other guests simply cannot believe their luck or their taste buds. Having started the meal gravely and in silence, gradually tongues are loosed. Tensions unwind. Laughter breaks out. Looks between people that had been cold and stern now become warm and joyful. A tsunami of peace breaks over them. Out of the blue this feast, this superabundance of food and fellowship has unlocked good things frozen within them. The feast has come as a gift, unmerited and unlooked for, provided by a stranger with skills they were completely unaware of – a stranger who had been living within their community for 14 years. It is left to the Officer, thus far confined to identifying their food and putting what they are eating into perspective, to understand fully and explain what has happened.

The French maid received a communication not long ago that someone looking after her interests in France had paid regularly on her behalf for entries to the early French state Lottery. She had recently won the massive sum of 10,000 francs. 10,000 francs was also the price of the greatest feast for 12 people at the greatest restaurant in Paris. The maid had been the chef of those feasts in her time. Now, out of the blue, she had used her gifts again, to surprise her adopted community with joy. She had used all her prize money on this one meal. Amid the unmerited generosity and miraculous joy, the community found life, harmony, new purpose, strength and vigour. 'What are you going to do now?' ask the sisters. 'Stay with you, if I can' says the maid. 'I have spent all my wealth. I am just as poor as you.'

The film version of this story is called 'Babette's Feast' – Babette being the name of the French maid. It is the first and only Danish film to win an Oscar, in 1988. I saw it on a short retreat last year. Perhaps we should revive the practice we had some years ago of showing films on Sunday nights in the Hall – so more could see *Babette's Feast* soon. Who knows, out of the blue, an invitation to do this might be published soon. The thing is: Babette's Feast is full of resonances both with the account of Jesus at the wedding in Cana and with the description of the Holy Spirit's activity in various human gifts in Corinthians.

Let's think about John 2. In both this morning's gospel and in the Danish story, someone outside the circle of the main characters shares something which transforms the community and what they are doing. In Cana grave embarrassment and social stigma threatens to overwhelm the host: the wine is running out. What are the celebrants to do? Out of the blue and from within their midst someone, Jesus, turns everything upside down. Vessels used for sacred purification are filled with vast, superabundant quantities of profane, worldly liquid – which bring life and joy back to the community. God is present. God is working. God is active in these ordinary, everyday things.

In *Babette's Feast* disobedience and dissension threaten to overwhelm the sisters' well meaning celebration. They have no food to eat and no experience of or appetite for joyful celebration. Out of the blue, from within their midst, someone – Babette – transforms the situation. The supper table groans with good food. Eyes light up with joy and delight. There is hope for the community as it embraces this moment and the stranger who gave it. God is present. God is working. God is active in these ordinary, everyday things.

And 1Corinthians 12 is reflected here too because *Babette's Feast* paints a picture of gifts employed for holy work. Babette's skill in cooking creates an occasion of overflowing hospitality, bringing the whole community to new life and new depth of relationship. And the sister's wisdom in keeping quiet about the meal before and as it is served enables the gift of overflowing generosity to speak and be savoured for itself.

Which leads me now to ask: are there people here today with gifts which, if brought into play, could take our community even more in the direction God yearns for us to go?

I can think of gifts being offered St Peter's recently, coming out of the blue and from directions we haven't been looking in, that seem to be contributing to God's mission in our community. Out of the blue, for instance, came a grant of £4,000 through Bristol City Council to start our Open Youth Work Project as a service to our community. Three years later the Project enables young people in our community to maintain and develop healthy relationships rather than stay in small pockets on their own or in isolation.

And in relation to our Hall for All project, out of the blue came Phil Heyward. Through his skill and vision the Hall development cost far less than the amount we were first faced with. Phil's vision and skills, coming from an unlikely quarter, contributed considerably to the resource we have now: a Hall which, with wise and prayerful planning, is developing our Christian fellowship and contributing to God's mission in this neighbourhood greatly.

So: who here today, I wonder, has something, out of the blue, to offer St Peter's?
What can you offer to help take this church further in the direction God yearns for us to go?

Maybe, as in story set in Jutland, you have been in the middle of the community for years – and the moment to offer some time, some skill, some fresh perspective is now. Maybe, as in the story set in Cana, you are a recent arrival or just passing through – but still have a gift, a contribution to make which, out of the blue, in ways none of us are expecting, could transform the way we do things round here – and steer us more in the direction God yearns for us to go.

It would be great to add to recent offers to work with the Secondary School aged young people in St Peter's. And to have offers to run the audio system during services or to play musical instruments – whatever your age and style – for worship in services. But it's over to you. I invite you... I challenge you: What gift, out of the blue, could you offer St Peter's? What insight, what skill, what idea are you nursing – let it out! Surprise us! Whatever you want to suggest, employing your gifts and skills, to help St Peter's travel in the direction God wants us to go, write it down and get it to me.

Like Jesus in the wedding of Cana, like Babette in that community in Jutland, may your insights, your suggestions, your offers – passed on in some way or other to me - help take St Peter's more in the direction God yearns for us all to go. Amen.