BACCHUS AND JESUS

—a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
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One of the things that sometimes surprises the American tourist as he travels along the Mediterranean coastline is how many ancient Christian churches were built on the foundations of Greek and Roman temples. This, of course, is true of some of our festivals, too. Christmas is one. Epiphany, our present season, is another. Both originally were pagan festival times taken over and transformed by the church.

I think we ought to take these phenomena more seriously than we usually do, especially during the Epipbaijyseason, especially with regard to today's Gospel story about Jesus, the water, and the wine.

Thus an early church father tells that a certain town not far from the Sea of Galilee was the scene of what he describes as an annual miracle. **On** the day of Epiphany, the day on which our Gospel was read, the water of a fountain in the local church was turned into wine, according to the church father. It's very interesting to learn from archeologists, then, that this very church seems to have been built on the site of an earlier temple dedicated to Bacchus, the god of wine. And it's interesting to learn,too, that part of the Bacchic ritual was a ceremony during which water was changed into wine.

Such evidence is enough to set one wondering. And it should. What actually is the significance of our Gospel story? Is it just another legend from the history of religions, or does it have something special to say?

I.

We should first consider the problem of the miraculous, I think. So many people get hung up on this question.

Notice that the miraculous dimension in our Gospel story is not as such the center of attention. Something astounding happens, to be sure, but not so that everyone can see it. The story ends with this punch line? "and his disciples believed in him." That is, men already standing in a special relation to Jesus had their faith deepened. With the exception of the servants who had drawn the water, no one else at the marriage feast knew what had happened. And even in the case of the servants, there's good reason to think that the Gospel writer intends them to represent the disciples symbolically, since the servants obey Jesus. In a word, according to our story the miraculous element is of significance only to men who are already committed. (Somewhat like the so-called proofs for the existence of God: if they make any sense at all, they usually only make sense to those who already believe in God.)

Once we get outside the New Testament, however, the attitude to the miraculous changes noticeably. When the church was establishing itself, often under hostile conditions, it was easy to join in a kind of miracle polemic. That is to say, — "Our ood can do better than

your god °" If the priests of Bacchus claim that they can change water into wine, sure enough the fountain in our narthex will change into wine by itself on the day when we read the story of the marriage at Cana- That kind of thing.

Jesus, as he is depicted in the Gospel of John, is certainly not a strolling magician. But, unfortunately, he often came close to being represented in that guise when the church rushed to keep up with the Joneses °

I don't think that these few words answer all the questions we can raise about miracles, but at least they should help us to keep the miracle problem from being an obstacle to understanding.

II.

Let's consider this fellow Bacchus, then. As you know, he is the god of wine. But in Greek stories he's also much more than that. As one classical scholar says, "He represents the surge and excitement of life and growth, and the intoxication not only of wine but of animal impulse." Bacchus is also the patron of music and the arts, especially drama.

You might say that Bacchus is the god of Harvard Square. From frugs to LSD, from beer parties to remarkable dramatic productions, from ecstatic ski-trips to highly individualistic(not to say anarchic) political behavior. This is the Bacchic sphere of influence. It's interesting, in this connection, that when the Euripides play about Bacchus was performed here a few months ago, it was done rather convincingly in modern dress. Bacchus himself looked as if he had walked right out of Harvard Square.

And the church is built on the site of <u>that</u> temple'. Epiphany is the replacement of <u>such</u> Bacchic rites? Why the very thought of it is enough to send pious churchmen into a state of shock. But Church history tells us that the Bacchic temple and the Christian cathedral are intimately related.

I am suggesting that there's something authentic about frugs and LSD, beer parties and those remarkable dramatic productions, ecstatic ski-trips and highly individualistic political behavior. Bacchus isn't <u>all</u> bad by any means. I think that the authentic strain is this? the search for a new vitality.

Surely we need a new vitality today. Howevermuch promise it holds, modern technology presently seems to be sapping our sensitivity and creativity and spontaneity. As social philosopher Herbert Marcuse points out, modern technology does in an overwhelmingly efficient way what the traditional use of overt force and even terror could only partially do, namely, make us cogs in a giant bureaucratic machine called the consensus society. We are so well fed and well cared for that it's very difficult for any of us to step too far out of place. It's all too easy for us to become dull and predictable and pedestrian.

So it's refreshing to find people unwilling to give into the dullness and the drabness and the deadness of it all. It*s refreshing

to find people striving for a new vitality. And I think that's one reason why Harvard Square has become a Mecca for people from the whole Boston area. Around here people have not been willing to surrender to the machine consensus.

But the disciples of Bacchus often end up being prisoners of the very blind necessity or the very headless technology against which they are rebelling. Why? Because Bacchus stands for the sheer release of vital forces, — forces which often seem to have little or no direction.

Bacchus actually represents a withdrawal from society, especially technological urban society. Bacchus, after all, is a god of nature not human history. And this is appealing to Americans, obviously. A man like Thoreau, for example, will have nothing to do with the problems of the city. Similarly for many who take LSD. A certain student told me not too long ago, "Man, once you've taken a trip, you're not in a hurry to rush in and change anything." From what I can observe, moreover, our contemporary interest in the Happening isn't much different. The Happening seems to be a more or less ecstatic moment of withdrawal from the real world. Some of these Happenings even have aggressive and sadistic overtvvss, not unlike the primitive Greek Bacchic cults.

You "take a trip," you get yourself inebriated, you live yourself into a remarkable dramatic production, but that doesn't begin to change things. You always have to wake up in the morning in the same old world. The sometimes meaningless load of papers and exams is still there. The fighting is still going on in Viet Nam. The Inner Belt is still about to tear the guts out of Cambridge. The tedious applications for graduate school are still to be filled out.

The Bacchic moment is basically a moment of withdrawal. It doesn't really come to grips with the daily world in which we live.

III.

It would be overly simple to say that the Christian faith resolves the dilemma here. But I think we can say that the way to a resolution is opened.

"Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out and take it to the steward of the feast.'" The verb "draw out" used here is the verb commonly used for drawing water from a well, a rather odd usage it would seem since there is no well in the story, only vessels. Yet it's not odd when we recall a later story in the Gospel of John where Jesus speaks with a woman from Samaria standing at a well. After some conversation, Jesus says to the womans "Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (Jn. 4s 13)

So in the narrative before us Jesus is bidding the servants to reach down into the deep well-springs of life., into the very life of

God himself. Here is a marked difference between Jesus and Bacchus. Bacchus and his disciples look to themselves, to the vital powers of nature which flow in their own veins ° Jesus and his disciples look to the infinite depths, to God the Creator who is the well-spring of all life natural and historical.

Then we should consider the wine. You reach down into this infinite well-spring of living water and you receive wine. This image, wine, has a wide range of meanings for John. It refers preeminently to the blood of Christ spilled on the Cross for the sake of the world.

Which is to say that the infinite well-spring of life is not an undifferentiated mass of sheer vitality. Rather it is the vitality of self-giving love. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son°(Jn. 3?16) Bacchus would never give himself for anyone. Bacchus is concerned with Bacchus and no one else, except those who are also concerned with Bacchus. Jesus presents the vitality of self-giving love. Bacchus presents ffce vitality of self-indulgence and self-affirmation.

And notice how the vitality of self-giving love spills over into the world, how it runs like fresh rain on to a parched land? "This is my commandment," Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "that you love one another as I have loved you."(Jn. 15?12) That is to say, the vitality of self-giving love works to transform the world, not to withdraw from the world. You have an abiding passion and sensitivity and creativity and spontaneity for your brother's sake. You don't focus your passion on achieving your private ecstatic moment.

Our Epistle lesson highlights this kind of vitality. Listen to its passion? "hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord."(Ro. 12 ? 9-11)

So wine for the Gospel of John means the infinite depths of God’s self-giving love in Christ. Wine also means the vibrant life of self-sacrifice characteristics of those who take the name of Christ. But wine means even more. It means that the vitality of God's self-giving love is mediated to us today, right where we are. Here in Bacchus's own backyard. For John also understands wine in a sacramental sense? to mean that God, who first loved us in Christ, mediates that love to us at our Lord's table. We drink from the font of life and love right here. Thenceforth we show this living sacrificial love to those around us. Our Cup flows over into the world.

A person who communes, then, will be one who is inclined thereafter to transfrom, not to withdraw from, what sometimes seems to be the blind necessity of our technological world. He will not surrender to or run from the computer, for example. He will work to have it be the servant not the master of men. He will likewise not be inclined to "take a trip," literally or figuratively. He will rather want to stay in the city and work to transform it.

This wine, I submit, is the new vitality for which we all are searching °