

There are many possible themes to explore in today's readings – everything from Jesus' first miracle to the amazing insights of St. Paul as he talks about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The first reading is striking as well, as Isaiah promises not just good news, but great news – for God is going to rejoice in you! If there's one thing that all of the readings share, it is a simple, yet profound recognition that God doesn't simply act to change things, he acts with *abundance*. The water made into wine isn't just a couple of bottles, it is over 650 bottles. God not only wants to spoil us, he wants to overwhelm us with good things.

A couple of weeks ago, a man named Marty found himself in dire straits. In the prior two months, he went from a good paying job, a girlfriend, and a nice apartment into a nightmare. His former boss, due to nothing more than paranoid misunderstanding, accused Marty of stealing a work truck. To Marty's astonishment, he was booked into jail. As the DA and his lawyer negotiated how to extricate him, he lost his job, all new job prospects, his girlfriend, and his apartment. Finally released and in the process of clearing his name, he found himself one night lying in his car, 3 in the morning, coughing from bronchitis. Marty is Catholic, but hasn't been near a church in years. He looked up to heaven and prayed the prayer that we've all prayed at our lowest life points, "God, please, please help me! I know I'm a sinner, but please, please."

We've held an emergency homeless shelter here at St. James for many years, part of a network of churches and congregations in North County who take on about a dozen homeless folks for two weeks at each location throughout the fall, winter, and spring. Our two weeks ran from January 6th to January 19th. We inherited this group from Temple Solel in Encinitas and we send them on to St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Encinitas today. We hadn't held the shelter here for the last two years because of the church renovation, so the network was very happy to have us back in rotation. Our Parish Hall is a perfect spot – big, with private rooms (well, storage closets anyway), a shower facility, and a big kitchen. We only lack one thing – experience. I had never involved myself with the Shelter in the past – that was a Deacon Joe thing. After casually saying yes, we'd do it, I began to dig deeper into what was needed to be done. I went home to my wife and told her, Honey, I think I blew it. There's a ton of work to do here!

In early December, I set up two tables outside of Mass and asked for volunteers to help with food, sleepovers, and supplies. My list was long and

detailed. 5 o'clock Mass, 7:30 Mass, 9:00 Mass – well, by the end of the 9 AM Mass, I had every slot filled. I was astonished. People called the office the next day – I was at 11:30 Mass and couldn't sign up – what's with that? I took back-up names. On the Thursday before the Sunday arrivals, an experienced helper to Deacon Joe from the past showed up at the office and asked how I was doing. At my look of dismay, she dropped everything and we spent the next 3 hours collecting all of the material from storage, sorting it out, and planning where each of our guests would sleep. She explained everything in detail, and I began to breathe. Two days later, on Saturday morning, a couple of Knights came over to help me set up the "rooms". Then a couple of more, and a couple of more, and a couple of more. What I expected to take 3-4 hours was done within 2. When I looked around at one point and saw 10 guys standing around yakking, and one guy arranging a table centerpiece, I knew that we had moved from hard work to goofing around, and that was just fine. We were ready.

About the same time that Marty was having his crisis, a married couple found themselves in a similar situation. With the rent being jacked up in their current place, they decided to move out and find a new apartment. What was supposed to be just a few nights sleeping in the back of their van turned into a night after night search for quiet streets where they could park unobtrusively at 10:30 PM, sleep to just before dawn, and exit out of there before neighbors complained. The key was to never park on a same street twice in a row. It was sort of okay, until the temperature dropped. In the end, a van is very similar to a large walk-in refrigerator, and they realized that this wasn't going to work. They held hands and prayed what they called a 911-prayer to God. Please, help us.

On Sunday, January 6th, the feast of the Epiphany, 11 people moved in to our Parish Hall – 9 adults and 2 children, one 4 and one 18 months. During the day, people brought in breakfast food. I was expecting some bagels and cream cheese. We got 8 gallons of milk, 4 gallons of juice, 4 loaves of bread, and 60 little cereal boxes. Oh yeah, we got some bagels and a tub of cream cheese. Then lunch food arrived – it was as if someone had raided the deli counter at Ralph's. Then dinner arrived – enough ziti and meatballs to serve 40 people, plus not one, but four pies. The next day 4 more loaves of bread, and another couple of pounds of deli meat. Abundance on abundance. Wait, I cried – stop! We have too much! Not one, but two people I asked to stop asked me, "Is there anything else you need? How about money?"

By this time, Marty and the couple were in the shelter, grateful for warmth and food. The real heartbreakers are the kids of course. Despite all we do to be friendly and gracious, no four-year old, no 18-month old deserves to be moved every two weeks from place to place. The four-year old was already showing signs of stress and anger, acting out from time to time. The 18-month old, to my amazement, was utterly delightful at all times – friendly and outgoing, babbling merrily along to whatever tune was playing in his little head. His name was Prince, and if you don't mind me stretching a metaphor, he was the little Prince of Peace.

All of this abundance, of course, pays dividends, just as God intends. Last week, on Saturday morning, Marty, the couple, and one other gal came to me and asked, "Can we go to Church here tonight?" Of course, I said. "We're all baptized Catholic," they informed me, "but haven't been in a while." Please, come, I said. "Can we receive communion?" You bet, I said. I saw them after Mass and asked what they thought. "It was wonderful," they said. "Father talked about the Body of Christ and we all had communion." They were grinning from ear to ear. Food for the journey, indeed.

James Keenan defines compassion as "the willingness to enter into the chaos of another." Jesus' mother Mary demonstrated this for her Son's sake, entering into the chaos of a wedding party going wrong. We can do the same whenever we're invited into the chaos of a neighbor or family member. The key thing to remember is that God loves it when we do this, and will always react with abundant grace whenever we stick our neck out this way. Thank you for being God's abundance to a dozen cold and hungry people this past week. The Lord delights in you.