

John 2:1-11

Isaiah 62:1-5; 1 Cor 12:1-11

Don't we all love a good wedding! The happy couple, the excuse to dress up rather grandly, the bride's elaborate dress, the Bridal Chorus and Wedding March, the confetti, the boring vicar droning on in a language no-one understands... And then, of course, there's the reception – the speeches, the dancing (or something vaguely resembling dancing), lots and lots of grub on the menu, and last but not least the booze - and usually plenteous supplies of it, at that. It all makes for a really memorable occasion.

Now if you enjoy going to weddings, then you'd be pleased to be reminded of the fact that nuptial / marriage imagery is to be found throughout the pages of the Bible. At the very beginning of the Bible, the opening of the book of Genesis climaxes in the creation of man and woman in God's image and the bodily union of husband and wife –“a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” - something that's reinforced by

the Lord Jesus in the Gospels. And at the other end of the Bible, in the final two chapters of Revelation, the New Jerusalem is unveiled coming down out of heaven from God, “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” And in between, weddings occur at significant moments in the story of God and his people – Isaac/Rebecca, Ruth/Boaz... Even in our Old Testament reading today, from the prophecy of Isaiah, Jerusalem's vindication and glory to be revealed before the nations, will result in joy which is described as being like the joy of a happy couple. However much our contemporary society might try to devalue it, God still celebrates marriage.

So, it's perhaps unsurprising that the first of the 'signs' of Jesus' glory in the Gospel of John takes place in the context of a wedding, lifting the nuptial party / wedding reception to new heights. Jesus had been invited to the wedding, possibly through a link with the family of the bride and groom; in fact, it seems that his mother Mary had some involvement in the catering arrangements. Unlike our present-day wedding celebrations which usually last no more

than an afternoon and evening, in 1st century Jewish society, they were long drawn out affairs, sometimes going on for as long as a week - that's a lot of grub and booze to get through! So it's probably not unexpected that there was a real risk that they could run out of wine. And that's just what happened in this case. Now for us today, this wouldn't be a big deal at all; someone would merely go down to the local 24-hour Tesco and raid the shelves of the alcoholic drinks aisle accordingly. But it wasn't so straight forward 2000 years ago. What's more, running out of wine at a wedding feast would have been seen as more than just a slight embarrassment – it was a serious social *faux pas* – this is the kind of thing that really shouldn't happen. All those guests sitting there with no liquid to wet their tongues. It was a complete catastrophe which would have reflected really badly on the bridegroom himself.

And so in the midst of this situation, Mary asks Jesus if he can do something about it. No doubt, over the years, she had got used to turning to her eldest son in time of need, especially if her husband Joseph had

already passed away. It might seem from his initial response to his mother's request that Jesus was reluctant to get involved in the matter. As he says, his hour had "not yet come". That's to say, his glory would indeed be fully revealed on the *Cross* – the climax of his ministry; but was this current situation perhaps a distraction from the *real* focus of the mission for which the Father had sent him into the world? Nonetheless, when Mary puts her faith in him, her faith is honoured. So Jesus directs the servants to fill up to the brim the six water jars, each holding 20-30 gallons; this in itself gives some indication of the magnitude of the miracle which Jesus was about to perform. And when the servants draw out some of the water which had miraculously turned into wine, and hand it to the chief steward, he expresses surprise at the quality of the new wine compared to what had been served earlier. In doing so, Jesus had reversed the usual custom by bringing out the quality wine well into the celebration, after most of the guests were probably already 'worse for wear' and would no longer have had any appreciation of what was going past their lips.

So, what is this extraordinary event all about? Well, at the very practical level, Jesus simply saved the day, and his provision of the new wine was like a wedding gift to the couple, thus fulfilling his obligations as a wedding guest; and what an amazing present indeed. And by the way, what this incident is *not* about is giving us a 'green light' to indulge in excessive alcohol consumption – it's got nothing to do with that; alcohol abuse can profoundly damage people's lives, and we would do well to follow the latest advice from the Department of Health when it comes to this matter.

So, what's Jesus' miracle *really* all about? Well, the author of the Gospel refers to Jesus' turning of the water into wine as a 'sign'. Now the purpose of a sign is, of course, to point beyond itself to something else. And in *this* case, the miracle is a sign pointing to who Jesus really *is*. In the well-known words of the Prologue to John's Gospel, the evangelist declares, "...we have *seen* his *glory*, the glory as of a Father's only Son, full of *grace* and truth." And so here, in this

miraculous event, the true glory of the Son of God is revealed, both in his ability to change water into wine, *and* in his *grace* in providing an abundance of quality wine to spare the bridegroom huge embarrassment. So, in response to witnessing this sign, Jesus' disciples put their faith/trust in *him*.

In fact, during the course of the account of the wedding at Cana, we see a couple of other examples of people putting their faith in Jesus and showing obedience to him. The first is Mary. In commanding the servants, "do whatever he [Jesus] tells you", she was demonstrating real faith in her son, that he could indeed transform the situation. In fact, her reaction is something of a model for intercessory prayer; rather than telling Jesus what she expects him to do, she simply lays the need before Jesus and trusts him to respond as *he* wills. In the same way, when *we* engage in prayer, do *we* simply lay *our* needs before the Lord, trusting that he *knows* how best to respond to our needs? Or do we tend to 'dictate' to him, expecting him to respond as *we* want him to? If we have committed our lives to

Christ, we ought *not* to be seeking to do things ‘*my way*’, but rather to allow *his* will to be done in all things.

The other example of faith is that provided by the servants. Their unquestioning obedience and their faith in Jesus’ word played an important part in the miracle. They did what Jesus said, even though they didn’t know what was going to happen. For all they knew, they could have taken the cup to the chief steward only to find it still to be water. But no, they placed their trust in the Lord and they too witnessed his glory revealed in their midst. In the same way, do *we* have faith that Jesus can transform *our* lives and the situations *we* face?

And when we dig a bit deeper, we find even more significance behind this miracle. It’s probably *no* mere detail that the Gospel writer notes that the stone jars holding the water were used “for the Jewish rites of purification”. The Jewish law required that people had to ceremonially wash their hands before eating meals, and the vessels used also had to

be cleaned. This wasn’t simply about good hygiene, but about ritual purity. In a sense, the water jars represented all the rules and regulations and rituals of Judaism. By contrast, Jesus brought the ‘new wine’ of the Kingdom of God. Just as the water was turned into wine – and a wine far superior to what they had before – so what Jesus brings is far superior to the old wine of the old religion. In the coming of Jesus, God has indeed kept the *best* wine until now. And this is clear in two ways. Firstly, when it came to being made pure in God’s sight, the Jewish law with its rituals and ceremonials, could only point the way, but it could give no relief to those whose consciences were burdened by sin. Cleansing rituals could never truly remove sin – you could wash your hands over and over again, but it did nothing to take away sin. By contrast, through his sacrifice made once for all upon the Cross, Jesus *is* able to save completely those who come to God through him – he is the Lamb of God who takes away our sin. And secondly, the old Jewish practices about purification could *point* people to the way of holiness, but could not in themselves *make* people holy. By contrast,

Christ has brought the new covenant in which we are given a new, a changed heart. As Jeremiah had prophesied centuries earlier, under the new covenant, God will put his law *within* us and will write it on our *hearts*. So, if we are in Christ, we are a *new* creation – we are empowered to live a holy life through the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.

When we come to worship, there are various rituals and ceremonies which we usually engage in. Our Gospel reading reminds us, though, that these things in themselves are powerless to take away our sin. It's only by putting our trust in Christ and his saving death on the Cross, that we can truly know our sins forgiven. And neither can those rituals and ceremonies in themselves make us any more holy. It's only when we allow the new wine of the Holy Spirit to enter into our lives that we can be truly transformed into the people God wants us to be. And then, in turn, others will be able to see the glory of Christ reflected in and through our lives; as the collect / special prayer for today puts it so clearly:

'Almighty God, in Christ you make all things new: transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your heavenly glory...'

So, just as Jesus turned the water into wine at the wedding in Cana, to what extent have we allowed him to transform *our* lives? As Bishop Tom Wright so wonderfully puts it, "When we leave church, or rise from prayer...would people mistake us for wedding guests? For party-goers? Why not? Did we 'do whatever he tells' us? Did we see his glory and believe?"

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks and praise that, through your Son, you make all things new. We ask that you would renew us by the power of your Holy Spirit, that your glory may be seen in and through our lives. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.