

Sermon for SJB and SSC Sunday Jan 29th 2023 John 2v1-11

There are a whole host of possibilities for anyone planning a wedding in our 21st century western society aren't there, depending of course on budget and personal opinions. But in the time of Jesus in Middle Eastern society, the traditions were much more fixed and obligatory.

The evening before the wedding the bridegroom and his friends would go to the bride's home. They'd form a procession and as they sang and danced around her, the bride would be carried ceremoniously to the bridegroom's home. The rest of the evening would be spent celebrating and the bride and bridesmaids would spend the night there in a room specially prepared. The next day the ceremonies would continue and in the evening there'd be a feast.

This is the point they'd reached at the wedding at Cana described for us by John and after that, by the way, the celebrations would go on for another seven days.

Now, come with me in your imaginations if you will, to this particular wedding feast. Come inside and you'll see a room arranged with three tables placed along three sides of a rectangle.

These are almost at floor level with the guests stretched out on low couches, leaning on the left elbow and eating with the other hand- -sharing food and helping neighbours on either side.

Everyone in the village is here and relations and friends from other villages as well. Cana's just a simple village in Galilee-so to make the kind of wedding feast that tradition demands, nearly everyone in the community will have been helping out. It's very likely that the bride or groom is related to Mary's family. Cana's the next village to Nazareth. You can see Mary and Jesus and his friends among the guests. Mary may well have been involved with the preparations. At any rate she's the one who'll take action when there seems to be a serious hitch later on.

One of the relations or friends is nominated as chief steward, or "master of the banquet". The literal meaning of the word used is actually: "the ruler of the three couches"

He's walking about making sure everyone's alright for drink, cracking jokes and keeping things moving, chivying those helping out as servants while the guests recline and enjoy the feast. All's going swimmingly until suddenly, consternation! They've run out of wine!

We 21st century people observing all this need to understand why it's such a disaster. Hospitality in this society is sacred. Running out of wine at a wedding will bring disgrace on the family and they've no means of replenishing supplies. It's a terrible omen at the start of this young couple's married life. They'll never live it down.

Mary turns to Jesus for help in this crisis. He gives his rather cryptic answer about this not yet being his moment, but she simply instructs the servants, "Do Whatever he tells you."

Notice that tremendous confidence that Jesus will be able to help. "Do whatever he tells you," she says..

What he tells them to do- -fill up the stone water jars- -is decidedly weird. These are the huge stone jars kept specially for the obligatory ritual washing ceremonies. Why do they need filling just now of all times, in the middle of the feast? The guests have already undergone the hand and foot washing rituals. Even weirder is asking the servants to then pour some of the water out and take it to the chief steward! Whatever must they think of that strange

instruction? But such is the authority of Jesus that they're doing as he says, however weird it must seem. The chief steward is taking what they offer him, not knowing where it's come from. He's tasting it, going to the bridegroom and commenting:

"Most people bring out the best wine first and then the plonk when people are getting merry and not so fussy about what they're drinking. But you have kept the best wine until now".

John leaves it to our imagination as to what follows. The whole thing probably going down in history as the greatest wedding-party ever!

He simply ends with these words: "Jesus did this, **the first of his signs**, in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him."

The happiness of these humble people matters to Jesus. He's accepted the invitation to their celebrations and he's ready to use his power to rescue them from a very humiliating situation, so he quietly turns a potential disaster into a triumph. But he also uses it for his wider purpose- -to show those with eyes to see, the divine nature within him.

At the end of His Gospel John says this: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book. **But these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name**".

Like Matthew, Mark and Luke, John has to choose what to record and what to leave out. He chooses this story of the wedding feast very close to the beginning and calls it a "Sign":

Listen to the final verse again:

Jesus did this, **the first of his signs**, in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

In other words, what his disciples saw him do at that party showed them the power of God at work and so their faith and trust in him grew deeper. Not everyone was willing to see and believe though. Later signs were disputed and discredited, resented and used against Jesus. But the disciples saw- -and believed- -and trusted.

That's the way John ends the story, but what about the way he begins—

"On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee".

On the third day- -John's gospel is full of symbols and underlying meanings. He must mean us to make the connection between this "Third Day" and the great Third Day when Jesus came back to life after death. Jesus has the power to bring new life into every situation- -the transforming power of God's love bursting in on the world.

There are people, and you may be one of them for all I know, who find it hard to believe that Jesus actually turned water into wine. I don't have a problem with it- -pretty amazing things happened when Jesus was around- -but whatever happened to that water, the people drinking it were convinced it was wine!

Their party was transformed from a near disaster to a triumph because the servants were prepared to follow Mary's instructions to do whatever Jesus told them. In these events the life of Heaven came down to earth!

There's much more in the story that we could unpack- -the whole symbolism of the water pots for example- -the old rituals being transformed by the intervention of Jesus- -or the connection between this feast and the image of the wedding feast of the lamb in Heaven in

Revelation- - it's all fascinating stuff- -but this morning let's just focus once more on those words of Mary- -"do whatever he tells you".

The first disciples often found it hard to do whatever Jesus told them,-especially his instructions about loving each other and not wanting to be top dog all the time, but after they'd seen him tortured, killed, buried, then, -miraculously against all the odds, -alive again. When they were filled with his spirit at Pentecost, things changed.

His final instructions, to take his message of love and forgiveness to all nations and baptize them in his name was the most impossible thing you could have dreamed of-.Twelve ordinary people and a band of hangers on to take that message into a world ruled by the might of Rome which had put their leader to death, a world without printing, transport, broadcasting, email! How on earth were they to do that! Yet, they'd seen the signs. They were convinced by what they'd experienced and they took him seriously.

So 2000 years later, against all the odds, most of the world has at least had the chance to hear about Jesus, and countless millions have put their trust in him.

If everyone took him seriously wouldn't it be fantastic. The whole world would be transformed! Wars would cease, no one would be hungry or cold, everyone would love and share and forgive.

What joy there would be. But he warned us that many would not choose to take him seriously and his followers would not escape suffering.

What Jesus tells us to do may seem as weird in the world's terms as filling those stone jars with water and pouring it out for wedding guests to drink.

He tells us to love without making demands in return, to forgive those who have hurt us, to be ready to share our faith with others and to trust him in every situation.

So are we prepared to take him seriously? If we are he can transform ordinary things into special ones, and even when things are very tough- -as many people here can testify from experience- -including me- -knowing and trusting Jesus makes a difference.

Let me end with a little story for you to ponder. It's about a recovering alcoholic. This man had become a Christian and his mates were laughing at him: "You don't believe all that rubbish do you?" they taunted. "Do you really believe that Jesus turned water into wine?" The man thought for a moment then he said, "Whether he turned water into wine I'm not sure, but in my house, Christ turned beer into furniture".

Amen.

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