

Sermon for Holy Trinity Geneva on Sunday 19 January 2025 – The Second Sunday of Epiphany

Texts: Isaiah 62.1-5; I Corinthians 12.1-11; John 2.1-11

Being Transformed

Weddings are usually a time of great joy. For they mark a climax in the relationship of the couple getting married – their vows to commit themselves to each other and all the hope and potential which that brings.

We also know that in practice, however lovely the occasion, weddings can be stressful occasions. Not just for the bride and groom who have so much to remember and to be concerned with, but also for their families and those who are supporting them. Will my wedding dress fit on the day? Will there be enough table places if those guests who never replied suddenly show up? What will happen if the bride's parents, now separated and with a strained relationship, have a go at each other during the wedding meal?

It's no accident that St John has placed the wedding at Cana, near the beginning of his Gospel and has highlighted it as the event which marks the start of Jesus' ministry. In a way, it seems a curious choice – almost frivolous. Jesus isn't preaching to a great crowd, tackling the great religious leaders or performing an act of healing.

Instead, he is turning up with a group of his newly gathered disciples to Cana in Galilee. This was a small, obscure country village at the wedding of a couple, no doubt from that village. The wine runs out – Jesus miraculously provides much more for them and of the very best quality. It's a happy, good news story but one that given its context, can feel strange to have been highlighted by St John in this way.

Yet as with everything in St John's gospel, every incident and indeed each phase is pregnant with meaning. St John knows exactly why he is including this incident and why he is placing it where he does in his gospel. For the wedding at Cana is a sign of God's love for us, His creation and how God can work through our human weakness to transform us. We are going to be drawn into this story as well so listen carefully to see its significance and how it affects us.

We begin with the timing of the wedding. St John begins his account by telling us that 'On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee'. We don't know of what this was the third day. But we are given a clue with the presence of Mary, the mother of Jesus, whom we're told was there. From the context, it sounds as if she was a long-standing friend of the family and she is there helping. It's through this connection, that Jesus and his disciples are also invited.

Mary notices that the wine has run out, and with deep compassion realises what this will mean for the young couple. Wedding festivities, however humble the couple, usually lasted for several days and all the guests would expect to be fed and wined during that time. For the wine to run out would be both a social shame which would

be hard to live down and get their marriage off to a bad start. So Mary quietly says to Jesus, "They have not wine".

Jesus' response to Mary is harsh. Literally translated from the Greek it is, "Woman, what have you and I in common?" To understand what this means, we need to look at the deeper symbolism in this story to which St John is pointing us. The wine which is running out, represents the old order of religious life and practice and the people's relationship with God which has become empty and sterile through their sin. It isn't bringing joy and new life anymore.

Jesus also replies to Mary, "My hour has not yet come". To understand this, we need to look again at Mary. For Mary only appears at one other place in St John's gospel and that is towards the end when she is there with the other women and the beloved disciple at the foot of the Cross. Jesus is pointing ahead to the moment when his full glory will be revealed as he dies for us on the Cross.

Yet this moment then become a catalyst both for Mary and for Jesus. Mary doesn't say anything in response to Jesus but instead tells the servant, "Do whatever he tells you". Again, this action is full of significance. For Mary, representing the old order, is in this action handing over to Jesus, who is bringing in the new order, symbolised by the new wine of the kingdom.

This moment is a catalyst for Jesus, I believe, because Mary's words to him bring together in him, his growing awareness of the ministry to which God was calling him, which we saw proclaimed in the Baptism of Christ last week. So he acts, telling the servant to fill the six large water jars used for Jewish rites of purification, to the brim with water and to take some to the chief steward (who was, in effect, the Master of Ceremonies).

They obey him, take the water which has become wine to the Chief Steward, who tastes it, is delighted with it and remarks to the bridegroom on the remarkable fact that he has saved the best wine till last. There is an abundance of wine – probably between 120-180 gallons (455- 680 litres) – enough to provide the best wedding ever!

But what is most significant is the response of his disciples to Jesus. Remember that it is very early days – they have only recently joined him and for some, including Nathaniel for whom Cana was his native village, it may have been the first big social event they had shared with him. Yet St John tells us that in what they witnessed at this miracle in Cana, the disciples glimpsed something of his glory and came to faith in him.

So through this apparently simple story of a lowly couple's wedding which could have ended in disaster but was saved by Jesus, we're led by St John into the very heart of his gospel. That heart is that God loves us, saw how we were trapped through sin (the failure of the old order) and in that love, sent His only Son Jesus to save us. In the wedding feast at Cana, Jesus points to how this will happen, through offering himself on the Cross for us and also reveals to us the abundance of God's love for us in the transformation of the water into wine. St John doesn't speak of

miracles and healing but rather of signs – in the first sign – and this is the first sign so that we believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

I said at the beginning of this sermon that this story affects each one of us and indeed it does. It brings us, first, to think about those parts of our own nature and lives which are currently running dry. It challenges us to think and name those things where we feel dried up, without hope or inspiration. What frightens us at present? where do we feel we cannot bring about badly needed change either in ourselves or our community?

God invites us to bring our sense of emptiness, of running dry, of failure to Him in love and hope. For the Cana story shows us that God doesn't despise or give up on us in our weakness and failure. For water is the most basic of the elements and it is of what we are physically formed. The miracle at Cana reveals that God in Christ, takes what we are, fills us up through the Holy Spirit and transforms us to new life – the life of His kingdom. Moreover, God does this, not by rejecting what we are but rather by filling up and transforming us.

What we do need to do is to put our trust in Christ. Mary told the servants, "Do whatever he tells you". In the same way, if we ask Jesus to help transform us, then church and the world, then we must be ready to listen to Him and follow what He says. Often this may be surprising – often it may be uncomfortable and not what we could have necessarily chosen.

But we can trust Him, because of what this miracle at Cana is showing us about the nature of God and His Son Jesus Christ. It shows us of God's love for us and determination to help us and our world even when we get into a terrible mess and muddle. It shows us that God loves us so much that He is willing to allow His only Son Jesus to die for us – this is the 'great sign' to which all the other signs in St John's gospel including this miracle at Cana point us towards. We can trust Him because of the gentleness and compassion of God we see at Cana - taking us as we are, cherishing us in our weakness and failure, filling us up and transforming us. We can trust Him, because Cana shows us, not just the abundance of God's love for us and the world – that plenitude of wine flowing over but also because God wants for us the very best – "You have kept the best wine till last".

We can trust God because the miracle at Cana also points us to hope of our transformation just at that point of our ultimate human weakness, when we face our death. It points to the marriage supper of the Lamb which is referred to in the Book of Revelation (19.9) and also the parable which Jesus tells of the Great Feast as recorded by St Luke (14.15-24). Jesus' glory comes through His death and through this, the 'best wine', the wine of God's kingdom flows freely to bring us salvation and transformation.

Finally, just as the servant shared the fine wine with the guests at the wedding at Cana once the Chief Steward had sampled it, so we too are called to share as we receive God's transforming love. It is never for us alone, but always to be passed on and shared.

This evening, at our quarterly Eucharist with prayers for healing, the laying-on of hands and anointing, we have an opportunity to bring our own weakness, our sense of running-dry and our failure before God trusting in His transformation. We can also bring before Him those things in the world which seem so fragile and in which we feel so helpless. These include the temporary ceasefire which is due to come into effect in Gaza and Israel today; and in this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the uneasy relations which still exist between several Christian denominations today. We can do so trusting in the desire and power of God to heal and to transform.

Finally, I would bring your attention to our collect for today. It sums up, far more than I could ever hope to do, the truth which the wedding at Cana manifests to us of God's transforming love. I encourage you to take the order of service with you today and pray this collect every day of the coming week. As you do so, hold before God, all those things for which you are seeking His transformation.

*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.
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. **Amen***

The Revd Canon Dr Daphne Green