

The Wedding at Cana

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 20 January 2019 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Jn: 2:1-11

There is something about a wedding - weddings have a wonderful holiday atmosphere. Not only do people put aside their worries for a day and have a good time, but there's also something inspirational about a wedding. As two people commit themselves to one another for life, it really does seem for a moment as though love will not only change the world, but will outlast everything else. So at a wedding we catch a glimpse of how the world ought to be: full of promise and hope; different plans brought together in fellowship and celebration; everything shaped by and centred on love.

And so you can begin to understand why the Bible, when it's trying to describe Heaven, sometimes compares heaven to a wedding banquet. And in the gospel reading today that connection is almost explicitly made. Because this wedding at Cana of Galilee takes place on the third day - the day of resurrection. This wedding is being reported in order to show us something of God's 'New Creation' and of God's kingdom becoming a reality.

But at this wedding reception, there is a problem. They've run out of wine.

Now for a wedding reception to have no wine, kind of rips the soul out of it - a bit like a summer holiday without sunshine; christmas cake without icing; or evensong without music: you can still have it, but there's something seriously deficient about it. It puts me in mind of the old song you may remember: "There's nothing so lonesome, so dull or so drear, as to stand at the bar of a pub with no beer" - you remember that one? So this wedding which ought to be a sign of celebration and joy and all that is best in human life risks becoming a sign of the complete opposite: of shortage and disappointment; shame; with accusation and blame probably not far behind. "I thought you were ordering the wine". "No no. You said you were going to get it". And this wedding without wine

becomes a picture of our world. This beautiful world, full of abundance and good gifts; full of people just wanting to enjoy life and be happy. This world which designs to have love at its very heart, is all too often a place where what people actually experience is scarcity and shortage; rejection and greed; disappointment and lost hopes.

So often it can feel as though the wine has run out. And it feels so much worse because we still have that sense of its potential. The world should be so much better than this. Why can't we tackle global warming? Why can't people get equal access to justice in the courts? Why can't resources be shared more equally between rich and poor? Why do so many women experience sexual harassment? Why is racism still such a problem? None of these things are because we're ignorant. There's no mystery about what needs to happen to put them right.

But we lack the will. We get distracted. We're too selfish and narrow in our outlook and in the end we're simply unwilling to show love.

And so the wine runs out.

And then in the story Jesus appears: quiet words to servants behind the scenes and suddenly the party is back on. Not only is there enough wine to keep the whole village celebrating for a week, but it's the best quality. A wonderful vintage, Premier Cru classé. And suddenly this wedding is set to be very memorable indeed. The wine is associated not only with celebration and joy, but also with fertility and fruitfulness. Abundant wine had for centuries been an image linked with the reign of the Messiah, and the golden era of peace and justice which he was expected to bring, according to the prophets. So if you look back in the Old Testament of the prophet Amos, he says in one place, "Behold the days are coming when the mountain shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it, when God will restore the fortunes of his people. So at the heart of this story of the wedding without wine, we find Jesus, paradoxically revealing who he is without anyone knowing. And the wedding banquet is renewed and becomes better than before because Jesus is present. And it's a sign that God's creation is being renewed through the presence of his son: new life appears; hope and joy return;

forgiveness and freedom are announced; the earth yields its abundance; and the new wine of God's kingdom flows freely.

So I wonder, where in this story do you and I fit in?

I wonder which of the characters you particularly identify with. I confess I'm rather drawn to the steward responsible for presiding over the smooth running of everything without actually having a clue what's really going on below the surface. But seriously where do you think you are in this story? You might identify with the bride who's supposed to be the most important person at the wedding but who isn't to actually mentioned at all. The bride sails through it all oblivious, happy in the glow of her beloved's adoration, sustained by the warmth and regard of family and friends, but totally unaware that her big day would have been a complete disaster without Jesus. How many people in our world today are a bit like the bride? Just taking the good things for granted, unaware that all of life's gifts are as it were personal wedding presents from a loving God who simply is looking for our response. I wonder how far you identify with the bride?

Or perhaps you identify with the servants. We're not told very much about them either, what they thought about Jesus or how they felt about his instruction to fill the jars with water and then serve it at the tables. But there wouldn't have been a happy ending if the servants hadn't obeyed Jesus's instruction, however unlikely it might have seemed. I think many of us in the church are a bit like the servants, just faithfully getting on with the job, doing our best to respond to the ord's commands to love God and love our neighbour - maybe not always sure where it's going to lead us, not always sure perhaps what the point of it is. But the Lord has asked us to fill the water jars and then to serve it, and so that's what we'll do. It's unspectacular, but it's faithful and it yields fruits in countless small acts of practical service. And little by little, it changes the world for the better: doing the elderly neighbours shopping; giving contributions to the food bank; doing some voluntary work. This is what turns water into wine in God's kingdom.

Or maybe you identify with Mary and the disciples. Mary intercedes with Jesus bringing the needs to his attention. It's a classic example of intercessory prayer. And Catholic Christians will point to this story as part of the reason why they asked Mary to intercede

for them in their prayers today. But we can all be like Mary, bringing other people's needs into the presence of Jesus. And also pointing others to Christ as she does with the servants advising them "Just do whatever he tells you". It's not a bad way of doing evangelism. If someone is lost and unsure what to do you can do a lot worse than just offer Mary's advice: "Do what Jesus tells you; try to love God and try to love your neighbour; try to be generous and inclusive; try to forgive each other; try to bear one another's burdens". As for the other disciples all we know is at the end of the story, they believed in Jesus.

The thing about most of the disciples in this story is that it's not about their actions but it's more about their attitude. They're paying attention to Jesus, they're watching and noticing what he's doing. And as a result, they believe in him; they're drawing closer to him; they're becoming more aware of him, more sensitive to him; their lives are becoming filled with his presence and the awareness of his love. Theologians down the ages have taught that the goal of faith is to draw more and more into the knowledge of God's love, and that in heaven, that is what will fill our consciousness: our hearts and minds will be filled with the beauty and the ecstasy of love. It's there in the words of the old chorus, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and Grace.

And something of that is just hinted at in a very understated way in the simple punchline of this passage:

"Jesus did this, the first of his signs in Cana of Galilee and revealed His glory and His disciples believed in Him".