

Jesus turns water into wine: John 2 1-11

Woodstock – 20 January 2019

Like so many passages from John, the passage we heard this morning is hugely symbolic, not least because it's the first of the seven "signs" or miracles set out by John as signposts to the glory and divine nature of Jesus. However, rather than reflect on its symbolism, what I'm going to do is to share some reflections on the story and what it tells us about how Jesus wants us to respond to him and the part he wants to play in our lives.

My first response to the story of the miracle at Cana is one of surprise. Whilst there are lots of accounts in the gospels of Jesus socialising and enjoying meals with his friends, I'm not sure I've ever envisaged him as a party animal, still less someone who would take such trouble to keep the celebrations going.

Acknowledging my surprise at the very idea of Jesus in the thick of a party made me realise that I am all too ready to limit my vision of the human Jesus, seeing him as a serious, quiet man with charisma and wisdom, rather than as a fun loving individual keen to be in the midst of human celebrations such as the wedding feast.

Yet it is to a party that Jesus goes with his disciples immediately after calling them and wedding parties in first century Palestine were not half-hearted affairs. They lasted for about a week and were occasions when eating and drinking extravagantly was encouraged, in stark contrast to the "getting by and eking out" of most people's daily life. While we have no specific accounts of Jesus dancing, singing, joking or tucking into the feast, we have no indication either that he was a wallflower on the margins. Maybe some of you, like me, feel challenged by this story to expand your image of Jesus and to acknowledge that, like his spirit, he too may have liked to dance!

In day to day life, there are from time to time moments when someone we've put on a pedestal or dismissed as out of touch surprises us by joining in with an activity and, when they do, it changes forever the way we feel about that person and our relationship with them. I suspect that, in my family, I'm seen as one of the more cautious, serious individuals. On walks I'm the one most

likely to be worrying about whether we're on the right path & it's often me who is most nervous when my more adventurous brother in law, Andrew, sets off across the fell side following only a compass bearing and expecting us all to follow.

As I prepared my thoughts for this morning, I was reminded how, on one very damp, grey day Andrew led us at pace down a steep downhill slope covered in thick heather and grass. Walking was difficult and one by one our party decided to set aside dignity and to sit down and slide. I could see my children watching me, wondering if I would join in and, rather reluctantly, I did. It was wonderful! Pulling myself along with my heels was much easier than walking and it was fun as well, especially the last part of the slide over a grassy hummock (which some of the younger ones re-climbed for another go!)

It would have been so easy to struggle on walking but sliding with the rest made me truly part of the group just as Jesus' participation in a party cemented his human nature in all its facets and encourages us to envisage him at the very centre of our exuberant celebrations. He's there in the fun, as well as the struggles and he longs for us to have life in all its fullness and all its joy.

The author, Jeanette Winterson, tells how her mother, a rather staid, traditional individual, was provoked by the behaviour and aspirations of her much more unconventional daughter to ask the rather shocking but thought-provoking question: "Why be happy when you could be normal?" I suspect that we too sometimes lose sight of real happiness and place far too much store on being like those around us or worrying about what they think. Maybe we too have a tendency to stick to our own routines or to well-worn paths, meaning that we miss out on some of the fun, excitement and deep joy that Jesus offers?

I should make it clear at this point that I'm not advocating wild partying nor am I saying that all the means by which people gain pleasure are routes we should blindly follow. What I am suggesting is that we look again at our "normal" and ask ourselves whether Jesus is calling us to greater happiness.

I recently came across a copy of the address given many years ago at the funeral of my grandfather. It described him as a "happy man" because he "knew how to throw himself into his activities with wholehearted intensity.

The outward sign of this was a cheerful countenance and the things to which he gave himself were good things.”

If we could only throw ourselves into good things with more enthusiasm, perhaps we will rediscover the riches this life offers. Perhaps our laughter and the smiles on our faces will spill out into the communities around us and transform others’ perception of Jesus and his followers. Perhaps, with the inspiration and guidance of the spirit, we can do something which will ensure that the “good news of Jesus” is revealed to all and not left buried in the mist of baffling tradition, dullness or apparent irrelevance. Jesus doesn’t only extend his hand of friendship to the serious and subdued, he’s there in the midst of the party seeking new friends.

Jesus’ all-inclusive approach is underlined by the amount of wine he creates. It is truly astonishing – the water jars are huge, each the size of a wheelie bin (about 160 bottles of wine). Jesus provides at that party approximately 960 bottles (or 80 cases) of excellent wine. His provision is truly abundant, more than could be needed and more than enough for all. This isn’t a private miracle, providing wine for Jesus and his family and friends and letting others do their own thing. It isn’t a temporary solution, giving the host time to go out and find another source. It’s an absolute solution, giving, for no return, all the wine that could possibly be required and much, much more.

The quantities of wine remind us of God’s amazing and overwhelming generosity and of the things which we have in abundance, things we may take for granted in our affluent society where every day is not so different to a party day. In our world, many households consume more water in a day than was in the jars – an abundance we do not notice. Around half the food produced is never eaten and is thrown away – an abundance we do not notice. In daily life we enter overheated rooms and moan as we take off layers of clothing – an abundance we do not notice. I could go on.....

When we look at what we have there is so much to be thankful for and there are also the less tangible but even more valuable gifts of God’s love and spirit. Like the wine, they are poured out in abundance, filling us all many times over and never running out.

These are the gifts which can truly transform us and our world in so many ways. We heard what they brought to individuals in the early church in our reading from Corinthians – the power to heal, the power to work miracles, the gift of speaking God’s word, the gift of interpretation. These gifts are no less powerful or present today. They have not diminished over the years, although sometimes our ability to accept them fully and to embrace them may have!

Paul is clear in his teaching to the Corinthians that God gives ability to everyone for their particular service. He sees not what we are but what we can be and the story of the wedding at Cana is the story of Jesus taking something ordinary and everyday (like water) and turning it into something special. He can do that with us and with our lives. Like the magic book I shared earlier, Jesus can transform blank pages or dull line drawings into full colour lives lived to the utmost and filled with the joy and energy of his spirit.

God’s does the unexpected, just as Jesus did at Cana, surprising us again with the abundance and breadth of his gifts and turning even the most limited of us into effective vessels for the sharing of his spirit so that as we talk, or care or pray, we find coming out of us, not the water of our own power, but the wine of God’s love, mysteriously shared in us and poured out through us to the world.