

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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THE SERVANT'S STORY

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Isaiah 62:1-5

John 2:1-12

The reek of various perfumes mingled with the savoury odours of food and the smell of sweating bodies. Bearing yet another tray of falafel, Obed felt the warm, pungent atmosphere hit him anew. The wedding feast was in full swing. By now the muted politeness of the first half hour was forgotten and for two hours, people had been eating and drinking and latterly singing and dancing as well. Now faces shone with heat and perspiration, head-dresses were pushed a little askew, clothing began to take on a rumpled look; and the room was bedecked with smiles and reeling from laughter. It was a good party.

Not that Obed had expected anything else. His Master was well-known and well-liked in Cana. He was generous without being patronising and the whole town had been invited to his son's wedding, along with quite a few friends from other parts of Galilee. The widow, Mary, for example, sitting by the window there, enjoying her wine and laughing away with one of her son's young friends. Watching her, Obed smiled. This was one party he didn't mind serving for. He liked to see people enjoying themselves.

He wished he could have been at the ceremony. Only a poor servant, Obed had a strong romantic streak in him. He didn't know if he would ever be able to afford to keep a wife himself, far less pay a dowry, but dreams were free. Obed dreamed not just of marriage, but of a marriage where he and his bride truly loved each other.

Looking at the Master's son laughing with his friends and tossing back his wine, Obed hoped that he would love his bride. She was a quiet little woman, not long out of girlhood. Her father was one of the important men in Cana, and the marriage was seen by some as being of more civic than personal importance. Now that the two fathers were family, Cana could expect strong, unilateral government – except where the Romans felt bound to interfere, of course. The bride, Miriam was her name, sat apart from some of the noisier celebrations. In all that throng she was the most composed. Sentimentally Obed thought to himself that her bridal head-dress, a glittering, ostentatious crown of coins didn't look half as pretty as the face beneath it.

As he watched and mused, Obed had automatically been circling through the crowd, offering his fragrant, savoury morsels right and left. Now the plate was empty and he must go and check on the level of wine in the jugs. Judging by how much had been drunk, they must need some topping up.

Sure enough, of the five large earthenware pitchers, only one was more than a quarter full. Obed hurried off to find more wine. In the kitchen his mother was arranging fried

meats and vegetables on a platter, but Obed shook his head. "We need more wine first. That's more important. Where did you store it? Is it still in the cellar?"

His mother frowned and nodded. "I think it must be – it's the only cool place, and it is certainly not in the kitchen."

The cellar was covered by a trap door in a corner of the room. Raising this, Obed peered down into the shallow pit lined with fresh rushes where foods were kept cool for short times. It was empty. Lying down on his stomach, he draped his head and torso over the edge, into the cool depths. He began pulling at the rushes, searching for skins of wine which might have become buried. But there was nothing there. The cellar was empty.

"It's all been used already!" he exclaimed. "Now what? I'll have to find the Master and ask what he wants me to do. Maybe we can borrow some from Alphaeus." Alphaeus was the bride's father.

Obed had been absent from the party for less than five minutes, but as he re-entered the room, it seemed to him that the revelry had reached a new level. The laughter was more raucous, the dancing less inhibited. He looked for his Master and saw to his dismay that he was at the centre of a group in the far corner, teaching them a rousing song. Taking a deep breath, and wishing that someone else could do this, Obed wove and shouldered his way through the crowd. In his short journey across the room he had his toes trodden on more than once, he endured an elbow in his ribs and he had to free himself from one of the bride's attendants, who tried to draw him into the dance.

Arrived at his destination, he hovered on the edge of the singing group, trying to attract his employer's attention. But the Master had contributed to the depletion of his wine, and did not notice his servant. Eventually Obed took the liberty of seizing his Master by the elbow and pulling him out of the group. He might as well have saved himself the bother, for his frenzied whispers made no impression on the drunken man, who simply clapped him on the back and told him to "Carry on, old chap!" Biting his lip, Obed turned away.

He found himself confronted by a pair of understanding eyes. It was the widow, Mary, from Nazareth.

"Is there a problem?" she asked quietly. "Did I hear you say something about wine? Can I help?"

Such was Obed's harassed state that he was almost overcome by her kindness. He knew he shouldn't speak of the incipient disgrace to a guest, but before he could help himself, he found he had blurted out the whole story. "The party will be spoiled and my Master will be disgraced and he will blame me. I could lose my job, and I know no other trade," he concluded. Aghast at his outpouring, he comforted himself with the reflection that the widow Mary was known to be very discreet and she didn't live in Cana, either.

So he was the more appalled when she asked him to come with her and went and pulled a lively young man out of the dance. "My eldest son, Jesus," she explained proudly, and proceeded to repeat Obed's story to him.

“But Ma’am, I shouldn’t have told you” Obed whispered as soon as she was done, for she wouldn’t be interrupted. “Sir, please tell no one else.”

The man Jesus, whispered to his mother and seemed to be objecting to something, but the widow Mary smiled: “Go with my son and do whatever he tells you,” she said.

Much later that night, lying on his thin mattress and marvelling over the events of the day, Obed sighed sadly. His own mother hadn’t believed his story. “I don’t know how you had the effrontery, or how you found the time, Obed, but you’ve been at that wine yourself.” Was he acerbic comment. “You’d better go and sleep it off and you can help me clean up in the morning. I wondered what you were doing, putting fresh water in the ritual vessels, but I suppose that was the drink directing your actions. But even so, it was water you filled the with; water, not wine. I suppose you’ve forgotten where you found the wine, but I can tell you it wasn’t in those huge jars. Now go to bed.”

He’d been angry at first. He wasn’t drunk. He had drunk only one chalice-full of wine, in pledging the new couple. He knew he didn’t smell, talk or walk drunken. But there never had been any arguing with his mother. Now lying there, reflecting, his anger melted away. He had witnessed a miracle. He had seen water become fine wine. He had seen his Master’s prestige rise. He had seen certain disaster turned into triumph.

For tonight, that was enough.

That is the servant’s story. He knew what happened, but no one else did. Not the steward, not the host, not the guests. John calls it the first of Jesus’ signs and tells us that it revealed his glory and that his disciples believed in him. John calls it a sign. That is the word he uses to refer to Jesus’ miracles – of which he records far fewer than the other gospel writers. John sees this as a sign, an indicator of something about Jesus, an indicator that he is who John has already called him in his opening chapter: the Word of God made flesh, God the Son. Jesus is revealed as the Word of God as the Son of God when he makes provision for a party to continue. That is not the only time when he is so revealed, of course, but we should not forget that the first sign that John records for us is that of Jesus helping others to have a good time.

Partying is not what Christians are best known for. The first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word “Christian” is not “Party on!!” And there is more to the Christian life than a big party. But God’s promise is that the Kingdom of God will be a banquet, a feast, a party – we remember that each time we come around the Lord’s table. When Jesus turned the water into wine he was signalling that that banquet, that party was beginning there and then, and it continues into the here and now. Isaiah told the people of Jerusalem that God rejoiced over them the way a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, and that picture is true for God’s rejoicing over us as well. Jesus was to talk later in his ministry about the joy that the angels have over one sinner who repents. Joy is a hallmark of heaven and of the kingdom of God.

Not all of our lives here on this earth are joyful and we are aware of many things which cause us distress and worry. But we should never forget that our true home, our real citizenship is with God, and that in his presence there is fullness of joy now and always. Amen.