



The Second Sunday of Epiphany
17 January 2016

The Wedding at Cana

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Reading: Isaiah 62.1-5; 1 Corinthians 12.1-11; John 2.1-11

I have always loved this story of the wedding of Cana because it's a brilliant piece of drama and surprise. It's a miracle but also a parable in its own right: disorientating us, forcing us to see things in a new way. At the beginning of his Gospel the writer is introducing us to his main players.

This is a miracle which seems so different from the other miracles which Christ performs. In nearly every other place Jesus' miracles are responses to situations which threaten life, or health, whereas at this wedding his miracle seems more like magic than healing. Jesus by turning water into wine seems to be doing the very kind of thing which in Matthew and Luke's Gospel he refuses to do when he is tempted by the devil to turn stones into bread. In our miracle at Cana Jesus produces literally gallons and gallons of wine. Why?

Let us look more carefully. On the third day there was a wedding in Cana. Notice the third day. Like a clue. Something else is going to happen on the third day later in this Gospel to bring new life of which this wedding is an early prelude.

"When the wine gave out", we are told, as if it is the most ordinary thing in the world. "When the wine gave out" - it's not a simple thing at all. It's a complete and absolute disaster. It's a breakdown of relationship. It's a thing of shame.

This wedding is like the overture to the action of this Gospel in which John introduces the themes of this drama. Centre stage at any wedding are the bride and the bridegroom, the chief steward and the guests but John draws our attention to the events taking place off-centre where Mary is pleading with her son: "They have no wine", she tells her son, the son seems reticent to get involved, even rude to his mother. We glimpse a real relationship, a mother eager to push her son forward to intervene and to help, believing in the ability of her son to bring about transformation. But Jesus, the son, is hanging back, unsure whether to get involved. Is the time right? Is this a cause he must get involved in? Can't he just be the bystander? "Woman, that's not our concern. It's none of our business." And maybe we would feel the same. Perhaps it's easier to stand aside. It's not my problem. I didn't cause it so let those who did sort it out or face the consequences. My time has not yet come. Leave me alone! But the wine running out does matter. Wine, in the context of this wedding, is not just a drink, it is a sign and sacrament, it has a meaning and a significance far beyond itself. In Jewish tradition it has a rich and costly sacrificial symbolism. Four cups of wine are shared at Seder on the first night of the Passover symbolising the covenant and relationship between God and his people: "I will take you out of slavery..... I will save you... I will redeem you... You will be my people..." and the fifth cup left undrunk - the cup of Elijah who will announce the coming of the Messiah, the chosen one who will liberate and set his people free.

And of course this wine in our Christian tradition is going to become a most holy sacrament. Wine the outward visible sign of God's love for us. "This is the cup of my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me." This wine is going to be the expression of the cost of Christ's love for us and the meaning of the salvation won for us. The blood and water pouring out from his side. The wine running out matters. What would you think if later in this Eucharist Katherine were to announce, "Sorry we have no more wine today please go

home without it!" At a wedding it's far worse than the bridegroom losing the ring, or the bride turning up without her wedding dress or the wedding-cake falling apart in transit. No the wine running out seems to speak beyond the event: at the very moment when action is sacrament and a sign of commitment it is like saying love and forgiveness have run out. The wine running out is a sign of the failure of the relationship with God and one another. And what is Jesus going to do about it?

I think many of us when we first heard the statement of the Anglican Primates in Canterbury this week felt that the wine had run out. In the words of our vicar's statement we read the Primates' statement with "grief and dismay" because it seemed such a failure of the very love and forgiveness that drew us into this covenant with God and one another in the first place. Several people have said to me that when they read the statement they felt like leaving the Anglican Communion, in fact, one said: "it is only because of churches like St Martin's that I am still part of it." When this wine of love and forgiveness runs out it diminishes us all. I think especially of all those who still live fearful of condemnation and persecution and violence because of their sexuality. Afraid to be who God created them to be - feeling their lives and their love is rejected and ostracised not only by the societies in which they live but also by the church and, by implication, God. Who will restore our true relationship? Who will set us free from this oppression?

In our wedding of Cana it is now that Mary intercedes: she will not accept that the running out of the wine is the end of the story, she does not give up believing in her son. She looks to Jesus. Because actually change, real change, the defeat of fear and prejudice, hatred, violence and injustice, begins not with proclamations and sanctions from above but with relationships of love, respect and trust. It can begin with a brave mother, or father or friend's love- or perhaps the real friend you never knew you had, that stays faithful and loyal to you even when others reject you. I wonder who stays faithful to you when everything else dries up? The grace and the generosity of God in this story has very little to do with the actions of the organisers of the wedding feast. And the deepest prayer is often born in our moments of deepest abandonment.

"Do whatever he tells you to do," Mary says to the servants. Let us note those words. It is Jesus they listen to. His words - the spirit of his love. The story is now no longer focused on the centre of the stage but on the servants on the edge, and those who actually listen to the voice of Jesus. It is at the heart, on the edge that the miracle comes. It is the servants behind the scene, not the masters of ceremony who see and participate in the silent miracle taking place. There are six stone water jars. Again symbolic, used for ritual purification. Yet six is the symbolic number of incompleteness and they are empty. Religion has failed to bring the purification and righteousness it claims. It is empty. Now at Jesus' bidding the jars are filled with fresh water to the very brim. The emptiness of their religious rituals is now filled to overflowing symbolising God's abundant generosity. The gifts of God again and again can refill all that is empty and used up. And Jesus is going to continue to work his miracles of grace whatever the success or failings of the church.

And now an incredible, unseen miracle takes place as the servants bring new wine to the wedding guests. The host and guests are unaware where the new wine has come from and yet they all taste it and experience it. It is the very best, the most delicious wine of all, and it has been saved until last. It is as though John's Gospel is inviting us to taste that wine too. I wonder what this wine means for you? What is your Eucharist? What is your Communion?

It is the wine which takes away fear and shame. Which turns disaster into celebration and unity. It is wine which reveals God's abundant gift of life for us when we least expected to find it. It is a sign of resurrection fully known only by those who listen to Christ - the servants who perform the miracle on the edge. At the same time it is a precious gift of covenant and relationship shared by all - enriching all because it is the wine of Christ's generous love and forgiveness that knows no boundaries or prejudice. You see, the truth is God's love for you never ever runs out. And in fact

the place where you think it has and that you stand condemned by the world. That is the very source, the very spring of God's abundant love. God's ways, thank God, are not our ways.

When real change comes it often comes from those who are on the edge - the poor, the marginalised, the outcast, the servant - the ones who listen to the voice of Christ's love. Remember Jesus himself will be that ostracised servant, he will be condemned by the leaders and religious authorities of his time, he will be persecuted, put to death, crucified for the sin of daring to love and to embody God's justice and forgiveness. And yet it is here, in the very darkest hour, outside the city wall, that new life is born and the offering of his unconditional love for each one of us will become the best most beautiful, delicious wine of all.

Our prayer today is that a similar transformation will take place in the Anglican Communion. We pray for all those who are oppressed by injustice and prejudice and in the words of Sam Wells, "we pray that the breaking of relationship ultimately rooted in fear will be displaced by deeper bonds of affection and that those who reproach and condemn will come to realise that the ones they are really impoverishing are themselves." We pray that all of us may one day share in the wedding feast and taste the wine of God's kingdom.