



John 2.1-11 16th January 2022

There's more than one way to turn water into wine

Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.

We once had an embarrassing moment at a wedding reception. We were the last table to go up for pudding and the profiteroles were on the verge of running out. And, actually, all the other puddings were already gone! I suspect the venue were deploying some new, younger staff members that afternoon and they'd been over generous with everyone who'd gone before, we'd been quite excited to see people come back with double helpings of trifle. Now, come the last table it was just one profiterole each and a miserly splash of cream. Alas, no miracle took place!

Not so at Cana in Galilee. Jesus turns the water into wine and it's a mind blowingly extravagant and generous gesture.

Commentators estimate that as Middle Eastern weddings often lasted up to a week, we are talking here of 500 litres from these 6 earthen ware jars. Now I did a calculation, at first multiplying by £5, thinking of the cheap bottles we often buy from Tesco's. Even that came to £2,500. But then I realise I was doing exactly the opposite to what happens in the story. Jesus turns it into the best wine, not the cheapest. Obviously, it came from Waitrose, so we are probably talking double at £5,000!

Extravagant generosity is the characteristic of this, the first miracle recorded in John's gospel. It isn't, interestingly enough, one about feeding the hungry or curing the infirm but saving the day at a community event which celebrated love.

And in John's view these were never ever to be considered merely as miracles. He had no time for faith built on the spectacular and sometimes has Jesus say just that. No, for him they are always signs, and this was the first of seven signs he records in his gospel. Moments to look beyond what happened to the meanings behind the happening, and there are lots here.

No first century church community would read this story without making a connection to the Eucharist and the wine shared in that special moment of remembrance and thanksgiving.

No student of scripture would read this story without making a connection to the idea that God's presence among us is likened to a wedding feast, or our time in eternity to a heavenly banquet.

No seeker for better days would read this story without making a connection to the idea preached by Amos the prophet that God's salvation would be like a time when *the mountains will drip with sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with it.*

Well, we are still in the season of Epiphany. A time when we recall the ways that God reveals himself to us. The baby at Bethlehem, the visit of the Wise Men, the Baptism of Jesus and the voice from heaven. All acts of self-disclosure by God. This is who I am.

Sometimes we understandably think that such communication best comes, or inevitably comes, through words. We value words and work hard at them in our worship. But God isn't limited to words.

So, in today's story this is an epiphany of generous love made known through actions. Utilitarian water jars become vats of the best possible wine. So, what is the action saying to us today?

Of course, and every teenager in a bible class needs to hear this, this morning's story was never really about the wine, it's about the village.

It's often said that in ancient societies it took a village to raise a child and that was surely true in Jesus' day. Even in his own life there was that moment returning from the temple that his parents thought someone else from their village group was looking after him. A corporate sense of responsibility.

I would imagine that at this wedding at Cana everyone knew everyone else. The village would have loved this new couple. Two of their own had found love and their happiness is a cause for celebration by everyone. To run out of wine would spoil something so precious, the joy that a whole village was experiencing in the name of love. Could anything be more important in a community than such a celebration? It encapsulates so much of what makes life good: togetherness, companionship, putting each other first and community.

Jesus, says John, does everything he can to affirm these values. And that's the

sign; that God affirms them too.

It may seem odd to us but the evidence of God's presence at Cana, the token of his blessing that day, was that the party could go on and the celebration of love was not curtailed.

Mary, I think had already had her own epiphany.

In John's gospel she is never called by name but known instead as Jesus' mother, and she doesn't appear often. With the birth narrative missing she, in fact, is mentioned just twice. Here, at the beginning of her son's ministry with his first sign, and then at the foot of the cross. The mother who is not only faithful but full of insight.

At one stage she urges Jesus to intervene. Like mothers through the ages, she prompts her son and encourages him to act. It's amazing what a mother's word can do! Even when he seems reluctant, she tells the steward to 'do whatever he tells you'. These are words of confidence in Jesus because I suspect Mary had begun to not only appreciate, but also to understand him.

In those tantalising moments that aren't recorded, the missing chapters of the gospel that we maybe wish had been written, might there not have been one, or many encounters, conversations and shared experiences when Mary got to know her son. Started to see his bright light and appreciate his deep knowledge. Began to realise that Gabriel's message was being fulfilled before her. God was at work in her family, and maybe her heart still leapt at that realisation. So, she says words that are brimming with confidence, love and belief in her son: *Do whatever he tells you.*

Epiphany moments are those times, often fleeting times, when God's presence seems real to us. They come not only as the bible is read, a sermon is heard, or prayers are recited, they can also come alive when a family gathers to celebrate a birthday, or a church has a meal to simply rejoice in being a community.

God's love still shines into our world as brightly as any star above Bethlehem. As you stand beside a friend in need, as you give more time than was really necessary to be a shoulder to cry upon, as you went the extra mile to live out the values upon which your life is built – these too can be down to earth occasions when God blesses our world. Moments when water is turned into wine.

I remember baptising an older lady who put so much thought into the day. We

had talked a lot about the meanings behind baptism and I knew for her this would be a celebration of God's faithfulness and presence in her life.

She invited a few friends to share a meal together afterwards and we broke bread bought at the town's lovely French Patisserie.

I preached, there were a lot of words that day, but that isn't what I remember. What I recall most are two actions. Before the service, with no one watching, we were at the baptistry and she said, Can I do something? And she got out a phial of water and poured it into the pool, water from the river Jordan collected on a visit she had made there the previous year. It was a lovely moment, not ostentatious, for the only person she wanted to know she had done this was me. And the other moment was after her baptism, when she lingered for longer than usual as I laid my hands upon her wet head and prayed a prayer of blessing. It was as if she never wanted that moment to end. All the actions and all the symbols had touched her heart, and ours, and somehow there had been an epiphany. A epiphany of God's love made real.

We rejoice whenever God touches our lives, and today's story reminds us that such a blessing can come in all sorts of ways. It may be in words, through sermons, hymns and prayers and we are grateful for these. But that presence of God and those expressions of supportive and affirming love can also be found, sometimes even more so, in actions and encounters with others. Through a baptism, at a party, a hospital bedside, a shared meal or a long walk in supportive silence with a friend.

At Cana Jesus gave us a wonderful sign. God is 'for us'. God wants us to celebrate love. This is the God who shows us in Jesus that nothing is more precious than supportive community. It is the essence of life and the character of God.

And surely, we can run with that? We can hold a hand of a friend in need, or dance and laugh with a family member in love – and know that God comes close in both.

Because every day there's more than one way to turn water into wine.

May it be so in the name of God, who constantly shares his light with us. Amen.