

Sermon for Epiphany 2 C

The Text: John 2:1-11

At the end of this text John says this was the first of Jesus' signs that revealed his glory. This is what Epiphany is all about: the revealing of who Jesus is, his glory. But that word 'sign' is a special one. It's John's word for a miracle. So what's a sign?

A sign is something that points beyond itself. John is saying that Jesus' miracles are not simply to get your attention like magic tricks, but his miracles also point to deeper truths about who Jesus is. As the first sign, I think it's fair to conclude that it has even more significance. So what does this sign, that Jesus changes water into wine and so restores the joy of a wedding feast, point us to? It points us to the truth that Jesus has come to bring joy to all people, and that the Christian faith then is something like a joyful wedding banquet. This is significant.

Everywhere we turn in these times there are people who have rejected or drifted from the faith, precisely because they see it not as a joyful feast, but as a dreary set of rules to follow. They think that you have to leave the Christian faith behind to really enjoy life. But in his very first miracle Jesus shows us the exact opposite. He shows us that his ultimate goal is to bring us into his eternal joy of the wedding feast that has no end.

This is not to say the Christian faith doesn't include self-denial, suffering, and even death. This was the path of our Lord Jesus, as it is for us. But that's not the end. That's not the goal. The end is a joyful feast.

Let's turn now to look more closely at the story, and as we do we'll draw out two main points:

Our emptiness and what we can do with it, and Jesus fullness and how he brings it.

There was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, a little town out in the country somewhere. It never really gets a mention in the New Testament other than here. Jesus mother was there. Jesus and his newly called disciples were also on the invitation list. It's quite possible this was a relative of Jesus. Maybe even one of his brothers or something like that. Mary appears quite prominent in the story and seems to be quite invested in the whole celebration.

Wedding feasts in eastern culture were and still are quite different from what we're used to. These celebrations would often go on for days and days. They would be community/village-wide events. And whereas in our culture the bride is usually the centre of the wedding and the bride's family traditionally pays the bill, in that culture the groom was more

central, and he also was responsible for providing the feast. Especially the wine.

So, when the wine runs out this is very embarrassing, even shameful you might say. This would've meant the party was effectively over, and people would be talking about this for years. It would've become part of the folklore: 'that young couple with the groom who couldn't get organised to have enough wine for their wedding feast!'

But as well as being a true miracle Jesus performed, this is all also a sign that points to deeper truths. So the wine running out is not only about wine.

In the Old Testament, wine is really a symbol for joy. We hear the Psalms speak of wine as that

which 'gladdens the heart' (Ps 104:15). Not only this, but when Israel turns away from the Lord and comes under his judgment their situation is often depicted as one where the vineyards are destroyed and there is no wine. When God acts to save his people, and when God sends his chosen Messiah, then we read words like the ones in Amos, '*that the mountains shall drip with sweet wine, And the hills shall flow with it*' (Amos 9:8). Wine in the Bible is almost always about more than wine.

When we read 'the wine runs out', we can legitimately understand here that this points us to all sorts of situations in our human life where we run dry. In our world and in our lives where we live by our own strength, the 'wine' always eventually runs out. We all eventually run dry. We realise our own emptiness.

So what do we do with our emptiness? Well, let's see now the example of Mary. She comes to Jesus in simple faith and says, '*they have no wine*'. Jesus' response is not particularly enthusiastic: '*Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come*'. It can even sound rude to us. He certainly does seem to be distancing himself a little here from his mother. Yet even in the face of this Mary persists and tells the servants, '*Do whatever he tells you*'.

Now what was Mary actually asking Jesus? I'm not sure. I'm not even sure Mary knew. I think she just saw the problem and she went straight to Jesus because she knew at some level he could help. But notice she doesn't actually make a request. There's almost an exasperated panic in her coming: '*they have no wine*'. It's as if she is saying, 'This is going to be a disaster! I don't know what you can do Jesus but please just do something'. Mary here is really a model of faith.

What do we do with our emptiness? What do we do with the emptiness of others we love? There's really only one thing to do: to bring it to Jesus. To come in simple faith. So we say to Jesus:

'the treatment the doctors can offer me has run out...'

'my employment opportunities have run out...'

'the joy in my Christian life seems to have run out...'

'the love in my marriage seems to have run out...'

'my patience and ability to parent my children has run out...'

'my relationships with friends and family have run out...'

We bring our emptiness to Jesus in simple faith, trusting in him to act. Then if, like Mary, we meet with what seems like less than an enthusiastic response from Jesus as our prayers seem to go unanswered, we still cling to Jesus in persistent faith, knowing that he will act in his time and in his way.

We've looked at our emptiness and what we do with it. Now let's shift focus and see Jesus' abundance, and how he brings it.

Have you ever known someone who is extremely generous and always going over the top? You ask them to bring a salad to your place for dinner, and they come with salad, as well as chocolates, wine, flowers and more!

Jesus is like this, but infinitely more. You ask him for a glass of water and he'll give you a reservoir. You ask for wine, and watch out—you might end up with a winery. Mary comes to Jesus with the emptiness of the feast. She's probably hoping he can somehow find a way to just tide them over to avoid too much embarrassment. But doesn't she get more than she bargained for?! The text says there are six stone jars which hold 20 or 30 gallons each. That's between 75 and 110 litres. Even on a conservative estimate we're talking 450 litres of wine. 600 bottles! If you take our standard 150 ml glass, that's 3000 glasses of wine. Now, don't take that as exact, my calculations might be a bit off! But even if they are, and even if there are a lot of people at this wedding over a few days, the point is: it's still a lot of wine. In Jesus we see the abundance of our God. In the chapter before this in John we heard that *'the word became flesh and lived among us... full of grace and truth, and from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace...'* John 1:14,16. Later in John we'll hear Jesus say, *'I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly...'* John 10:10. Here you have the same point but in a beautiful miracle with deeper significance. The God of abundance and extravagant generosity in Jesus Christ.

It's not just the quantity either, but the *quality* too. Jesus doesn't come with cheap plonk. These aren't the cleanskins that no one can sell. This is top shelf. Think Dom Perignon and Penfolds' Grange. This is the best. Jesus gives abundantly, and he gives us the best.

As I reflected on this and how we expect and pray for and receive God's abundance it reminded me of C.S. Lewis when he says, *'It would seem that our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.'*

Now we might ask: does this mean I can expect plenty of money and a big house and all the rest of it if I only ask God? Well, no, because that's not God's best. We think it's best, but that's not what God considers best. Listen to how St Paul puts it in Ephesians 1:3: *'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places...'*

Every spiritual blessing is yours in Christ Jesus.

Then let's notice one last thing about Jesus' abundance, which is, that the best is saved until last. The master of the feast says to the bridegroom:

'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk...' (Which, by the way, isn't saying these people were drunk. And it's certainly not saying that Jesus condones drunkenness. The point is that this is a general rule, that as people's palates aren't quite so sharp, you can get away with inferior wine).

That's what everyone else does, *'but you have kept the good wine until now.'*

In Christ God gives abundantly, he gives the best, and with God the best is always in the future. This is the reverse of the natural order of things. For us the passage of time generally means decline. We experience in this world the passing of life to death. But with God it's the other way around. He brings us from death to life. He brings the best wine last. With God the best is always to come. That's also why the rhythm of the Christian church has always been fast before feast - Lent before Easter - Advent before Christmas. Fast before feast. The best always saved until last.

In contrast with our emptiness, we see Jesus' abundance. But how does he bring this abundance? There's something else we need to see in this text. Those big jars holding all that water, what were they for? John says they were for the Jewish rites of purification. It seems perhaps that this again is pointing us to something deeper. Jesus who comes to bring abundant joy does this by first coming to be the ultimate purifier.

How does he do this? Well notice one more important little detail here. When Mary comes to Jesus what does he say? *'My hour has not yet come...'* What is his hour? If we read through John's Gospel we find

things like this: *'Now before the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world...'*. The hour is the hour of his death, when his true glory will be revealed.

Jesus hangs on that Cross to be the once for all purification for sin. The one who here provides hundreds of litres of the finest wine for a joyful wedding banquet will cry out in agony: 'I thirst...' before he was offered only sour wine to drink. On the Cross Jesus drinks the cup of judgment, so that we might drink the wine of joy at the wedding feast that has no end. Jesus is the true bridegroom.

With God the best is always in the future. This first sign of Jesus points to the ultimate end. In the final chapters of Revelation we hear 'blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb'. Eternal life with God is described as a wedding feast. Christ our bridegroom takes his bride the church into his embrace forever. As Isaiah prophesied in our Old Testament reading, *'The Lord delights in his people as a bridegroom delights in his bride'*.

I acknowledge that as we talk of this wedding imagery today that it is painful for some. It might remind some of the brokenness of their marriages. Perhaps it reminds others of the marriage so longed for but never able to be had, or haven't had yet. But please know this is the only true bridegroom who will never fail, who will always provide, who will always delight in you.

The changing of water into wine at the wedding of Cana is a sign. It reveals Jesus' glory and so strengthens our faith. It's a sign that in Jesus a new age is breaking in where God brings joy to all, and where people are invited to a feast.

In worship you are invited to a foretaste of that feast to come, where miraculous power is at work with bread and wine, so that we receive the body and blood of Christ. Here the master of the feast bids you to come and share in his joy, and your heavenly bridegroom delights in you as he takes you into his embrace. Amen.