

Sermon – Epiphany 3 Wedding at Cana

Weddings are memorable occasions but not always for the right reasons, as many an episode of *You've been framed* demonstrates.

We never learn who it is that was married at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, for the wedding is made memorable by the most extraordinary of miracles.

At this wedding we are able to picture Jesus sharing in a very human occasion, but one in which it was never intended that he should be centre stage, the focus of all the attention. 'Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding', we are told. For once, the scripture tells us, it is actually Jesus' mother, Mary, who is the more important guest.

Most of us have been to many a wedding, and indeed many a wedding reception. Even if you haven't, I am sure you can relate to the dreaded dilemma that no party organiser ever wishes to face – what to do if the wine runs out. Somewhere deep in our psyche this fear resides and there is many an off licence and supermarket that has benefitted as we try to ensure that it never happens to us.

Jesus is off duty and – perhaps – has had one or two drinks himself if the somewhat coarse language he uses to address his mother is to be believed.

We will never know what the relationship between Jesus and his mother was truly like but in this episode it is clear that his mother has the upper hand, for she immediately takes control of the situation and makes clear her

expectation that Jesus does 'something'. Whether it is through frustration or confidence, she has no trouble instructing her hosts' servants to 'do whatever he tells you'.

And then the events play out in their familiar pattern. A huge volume of water is turned into the most beautiful wine and it is the bridegroom, and not Jesus, who receives the credit.

We are, of course, still in the season of Epiphany and so this episode in Jesus' life is recounted now in order for us to celebrate another instance in which Jesus is recognised as divine. But note how it is only by his disciples; not by the mass of accumulated guests, not by the servants who witnessed the miracle, not by his grateful hosts whose face has been saved, not even by his mother; it is the disciples who accompanied him to the wedding feast in the first place who recognise him for who he is, and believe. Despite the magnitude of the miracle, the number of those convinced of Jesus' true identity, remains small.

In John's gospel there are seven 'signs' of Jesus of which this is the first; all are stories presented to emphasise Jesus' divinity, and to encourage belief in Jesus as the Son of God. This miracle is followed by the healings in Capernaum and at Bethesda, the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus walking on the water, the healing of the man born blind and finally the raising of Lazarus.

As is common with some of the other gospels, the identity of Jesus, and the challenge this posed for the disciples, is a continuing theme throughout John's gospel.

And it remains a central theme and challenge for the church today too. It is, after all, the key difference and stumbling block between Christianity and the two other Abrahamic faiths, Judaism and Islam. Belief in God remains very strong by people across the religious spectrum; belief in Jesus as the Son of God, commands far less support. And this last point is probably true of churchgoers as well.

A key question raised by the seven signs in John's gospel, and especially perhaps by the miracle at this wedding – which on the surface appears an entirely self-indulgent demonstration of divine authority – is the relationship between miracles and faith; both in the time of Jesus and now.

To what extent do we need miracles to convince ourselves of the truth of scripture, of the truth of the presence of God in our lives?

I wonder if you have ever prayed: “please God, just do this one thing, solve this one problem, and I will believe and the rest of my life is yours...”

The miracles alone do not appear to have convinced many of the truth of Jesus' identity, either then or now. Many of us will know of people who have been miraculously healed and we rejoice for them and give thanks to God for them too. But such amazing happenings do not lead to mass religious revivals.

So without for a moment disputing the miracles – for I am quite content to accept them for what they are, for I know of indisputable miracles in our own time – miracles alone are not enough to generate faith. And we know this from Jesus' frequent frustrated outbursts with his own disciples who, at

various times, simply did not understand.

So if miracles alone, are insufficient as a foundation for faith. What is?

For me, the answer to this lies in two ideas: repentance and acceptance.

Repentance is the liberating act – often very difficult to achieve - of turning away from one way of life to following another. Think for a moment of someone you know who is clearly well rooted spiritually – whether or not they are a churchgoer. Somewhere in their story there will be a point when they made a decision, exercised a choice, to do and be different. It may be a one off moment in their life – but it is more likely to be something they do almost daily. The conscious, intentional desire to try to be a decent human being. This attitude may be rooted in sorrow or in thankfulness, it might be accompanied by the language of faith, or it might not. But in way one or another it equates to that famous call of Jesus – Follow me.

The second idea that provides a foundation for faith is acceptance.

Some of you will know that I absolutely love theological debate and argument. And I love looking at scripture as literature with all the word play it contains, or delving into the sociological background of the 1st century or comparing the gospels to grasp what the different writers and editors were trying to convey and why.

For me, all of this is hugely enjoyable. But, like the miracles themselves, none of this is central to my faith at all. I don't need proof that any of it is true, to know that it is true or to

know the truth of God in my life, the lives of those I meet and the presence of God in the world around me. I simply accept it.

These two ideas appear in the old baptism service where candidates are asked 'Do you turn to Christ' – which embraces the idea of repentance and 'Do you submit to Christ as Lord' – which embraces the idea of acceptance.

We don't need to know everything; we don't need to be able to refute everything – but we do need to keep changing, keep improving, as decent human beings growing more closely into the likeness of Christ; and we do need to keep accepting Christ as Lord – not through wild blind obedience, but through simple trust.

All of this is condensed into the first two verses of one of my favourite hymns with which I will close:

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
forgive our foolish ways;
re clothe us in our rightful mind,
in purer lives thy service find,
in deeper reverence, praise.

In simple trust like theirs who heard
beside the Syrian sea
the gracious calling of the Lord,
let us, like them, without a word
rise up and follow thee.

Amen.

