

A Sign in the Wine (29 January 2023)

Luke 2:22-40 – Jesus is presented at the Temple (and John 2:1-11 – Jesus turns water into wine)

The whole season from Christmas to Candlemas is a reflection on the incarnation and what it reveals about Jesus Christ. It includes the visit of the Magi following the star, which was a sign for their journey. Then John the Baptist declares that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It features the start of the ministry of Jesus and the calling of the first disciples (and the call to Christian unity – that we ourselves are to be a sign pointing others towards God).

This season includes the well-known first miracle sign of Jesus – the wedding at Cana and his turning water into wine. And now, the presentation of the Christ child at the temple where, in addition to his parents following the purification rites, they witness prayers and praises from Simeon and Anna. Simeon said about Jesus being a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory of the people Israel; but he also says that “the child is destined ... to be a that sign that will be opposed”.

A few weeks ago, Rev David reminded us that this year is dedicated to being a year of discipleship for us in the Parish. A chance to have additional focus on what it means for each of us to be a follower of Jesus Christ and journey through life with him as our Lord and Saviour. It is a good idea at the start of any journey to know where you are headed, and this season points us in the right direction.

Today I want us to think about signs with my reflections based on that first miraculous sign at the wedding at Cana.

Up to about 30 years ago, at home, we used to have a go at wine making, but with varied success. We had the demijohns, the syphon tubes and funnels, the warming plate, cork inserter and labels. Initially we bought kits from Boots (the chemist); there were kits from which wine would be ready in just three weeks. We occasionally experimented with making wine using fresh ingredients. This included elderflower wine, but we let this one ferment for too long thinking that the eventual higher alcohol content would be good. It wasn't! It was disgusting!

The best one was a deep red elderberry brewed in a large bucket in the bath. And a fun one was potato and onion with raisins to give it a light rosé tint and hint of grape. Never did I think, even with the proper equipment, that water on its own would turn into wine. Water, over time, may stagnate or evaporate, but it will not, and cannot, become wine.

In the wedding at Cana story, a popular choice of reading at weddings, what John describes is clearly a miracle, an act of God for which there is no natural explanation.

There are some who say that miracles are impossible and that such stories in the Bible are mere fabrications or fantasies. One such was Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States. He didn't believe in miracles and in 1804 secretly set about producing what was later to become “The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth”. He worked systematically through the Gospels accounts of Jesus's life, cutting out the parts he considered represented the authentic Jesus and pasting them into a separate book, while discarding the rest. The result was a book filled with the teachings of Jesus but devoid of any miracles. I found a pdf copy online and there is no mention of the virgin

birth, no miracles, or references to them, nor of the resurrection. The book finishes with the crucifixion and burial of Jesus.

Richard Dawkins, the British evolutionary biologist, dismisses any doubt: “Events that are commonly called miracles are not supernatural, but part of a spectrum of more-or-less improbable events. A miracle, if it happens at all, is a tremendous stroke of luck.”

Yes, while ancient peoples did not know all that we now know about the way the world works, they knew more than enough to recognize some events as miraculous when they occurred. They knew that water does not become wine. They knew that dead people, executed under the most gruesome and thorough conditions, remain dead.

Fortunately, there are also eminent scientists who are Christians and who absolutely believe in the miracles of the Bible, especially the ultimate miracle that is Jesus Christ’s resurrection, for which there is much evidence.

For a successful journey the signs must be followed, whether direction signs, speed limits, place names, warnings, and so on. John, in his Gospel, describes what happened with the turning of the water into wine as a sign: “This the first of his miraculous signs Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee.” It was a sign – a word that John uses many times in his gospel. And these signs point to something or someone greater than itself. Just as the signs were important for the first disciples, and they didn’t always get it right, they are important for us as well.

This first sign revealed the person he was. Jesus wasn’t a show-off! Jesus didn’t perform this, his first miracle, to show off some supernatural display of power. He also didn’t do this to satisfy thirsty guests or critical sceptics. It “revealed his glory,” as John states (in 2:11). God was powerfully at work in the person of Jesus. The disciples will come to recognise that Jesus not only has glory from God, but he also possesses the glory of God.

This Gospel story isn’t really about weddings, but about the one who has the very power of creation, transforming water into wine. This was a spectacular miracle done in the most unspectacular of ways. Most tasted and enjoyed the wine but they missed the message.

The sign is also a sign of the Lord’s purpose. Jesus chose stone water pots used for ceremonial washing. This was no accident. Water can cleanse the external, but it can never cleanse the heart or satisfy the soul. Jesus was in effect announcing that he had come to replace the water of religion with the wine of his new life.

Jesus, here, is at the start of his ministry. He has just called his disciples to follow him. One of the first things Jesus does with his disciples is to drink wine as they share joy and celebration at this wedding. I pictured, in my imagination, the disciples with Jesus at a table in a similar manner portrayed by Leonard de Vinci in his famous painting of the Last Supper. One of the last things Jesus did with his disciples was to take a cup of wine and fill it with new meaning: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

The miracle is a sign of the Lord’s provision. When he supplies, he does not do it sparingly or simply to meet the minimum required. 120 to 150 gallons (or 720 to 900 bottles) is a lot of wine! The miracle bears witness to the abundance of and overflow of God’s grace in Christ. Jesus did what he did quietly, so that not everyone knew what had happened or who had done it. He did what he did

graciously; the groom was spared shame; potential embarrassment was turned into excitement and the groom became a social hero for doing the unexpected by providing the best wine last.

“This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him” (2:11). “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31-32).

As we journey together as Christ’s disciples today, may we not only see the signs but follow where they are pointing and put our faith and trust in him. May we enjoy the wine, but let’s not miss the significance of the sign!

Amen

(James Parsons, Reader)