

John 2: 1-11 – Transformation

Prayer

Buy one, get one free. That's an offer we know well. How about Buy one, get two free? It was a bit like that for Anna when she married me back in 2000. One husband, two teenage lads. I'm not sure she realised she was marrying into such a competitive family. We're still at it – Wordle every morning and then a What's App to say how we did. But Anna's gifts are elsewhere; she is far better than I am at reading people, at seeing what's going on under the surface. That can be quite a challenge because the meaning may not be obvious but it's there if we look carefully and think. In the last verse of our Gospel reading we find *Jesus did this, the first of his signs...* And that little word *sign* is the invitation to look deeper.

We read these words that are probably familiar and at the most straightforward level we might find ourselves thinking – *How did he do that?* I can't answer that. It was C S Lewis who once pointed out that every year God turns the water into wine through the grape and long process of fermentation, but on this occasion in Cana God cut out the middle man, as it were and created beautiful wine directly. I'm not sure it's the most promising line of enquiry to ask how Jesus did this. And even if we were able to explain it perfectly, what would that do for us? Would it make us better people? Would we love the Lord more and know him better? Probably not. So let's put the *how* question to one side and ask a different question – *why?*

At that time Jewish wedding celebrations tended to last. There's been rather too much in our media in recent days about parties, but they sure knew how to party in Cana. Wedding parties could go on for days, and it was the responsibility of the family to ensure that there was enough food and drink while there were guests. So to run out of wine was a social disaster. So when Jesus' mother came and had a quiet word with him, he responded *Woman...* Pause a moment, because if I addressed my mother thus, I think I know what the reaction would be, even at her grand old age of 91. But this was a different time and culture, and then it was actually a term of endearment. One translation puts it rather awkwardly as *dear woman* - a valiant effort. But Jesus does not seem particularly keen to help, but his mother knows him and tells the servants to do what he says. You know what happened next – 120-150 gallons. That's about 700 standard bottles to put into context. First class wine. And one family saved from social disaster. We are all meant to smile when we find the steward congratulating the bridegroom on the quality of the wine and giving him the credit for keeping the best wine until later in the party. We can see why someone described this story as a *romantic comedy*. Incidentally did you notice how few people knew what was going on? Jesus, the disciples, Jesus' mother and a few servants. Jesus did not go round trumpeting his miracles. Anna sometimes reminds me that when if I do something useful around the house, I make sure she notices. Rarity value? But there is something wonderfully discreet, even elusive about Jesus.

And you may have the feeling that we are still scratching the surface of the story. Look harder and there are some clues to invite us to go deeper. Why should Jesus say to Mary, *My hour has not yet come?* Right through John's Gospel Jesus speaks of his *hour* as a way of indicating his death on the cross. And that word *sign*. Jesus is said to have revealed his *glory* not his conjuring skills. There's another clue right at the start of the chapter, in the first four words, *On the third day*. That just resonates with meaning in the New Testament and in the Creed – *On the third day he rose again*. If you are reading a good novel or watching a good drama on Netflix or wherever, you realise that sections that seemed confusing at the time make sense in the light of what happened subsequently.

And that is so true of the Gospels. Jesus knew that if he turned water into wine, that would raise questions about who he is. And that set in train the whole sequence that would lead him to the cross. So in this story there are these little indicators – little clues that point us towards the cross and resurrection of Jesus. And John finishes the section with the significant words that we can easily overlook – *the disciples believed in him*. They trusted him, or more accurately they entrusted themselves to him. These were early days for them; they had so much to learn. But they committed themselves to Jesus Christ.

What for? Again in the story we find some clues about why Jesus came? He transformed the water into wine. He has come to transform people's lives. We notice that the water was in six stone jars – they were there *for the Jewish rites of purification*. Now that is not just an incidental detail. There was no need to say that at all, except there was every need because Jesus came to transform the old order of religion. No longer were the old rituals needed. Here is the new wine of God's Kingdom. Right through the Old Testament wine is associated with joy and gladness, God's abundance, the heavenly feast. So in changing the water into wine, Jesus is saying that religion is no longer about just going through the rituals; it's about his transforming power. Here's the good news about Jesus coming to transform the water of guilt, habitual failure and legalism into the wine of forgiveness, victory and joyful obedience. So look deeper – in this story is the offer of Jesus to transform your life and mine – to know his forgiveness and the surging power of his love that just overwhelms and overflows our hearts.

And all this impacts on what we see church for. The message is not only about transforming individuals. It was 120-150 gallons; it was the disciples who believed. If we bring in the perspective of our reading from I Corinthians where we read about the different gifts given to individuals within the body of Christ, we can begin to see a picture emerging of the church as a community of people being transformed by God through his Spirit. And just as the wine was not just for the insiders – for Jesus and the disciples but for the whole partying community of Cana – so what God is doing in his church today is good news for the whole community – probably not partying yet – of Tidenham and even Tutshill and Chepstow.

At its best the church community where we are accountable to one another, where we look out for one another, where we love one another is like new wine; it's a sign to those who are willing to look and look deeper that God is at work to heal the wounded, restore the broken and challenge the comfortable. It's January – let's spend 2022 praying and working under God's Spirit to be just that kind of community.

Prayer