

Sermon 19/01/25 John 2: 1-

The wedding at Cana

It really won't do at all! This story about the wedding at Cana. We have just read chapter one of John's gospel, the beautifully crafted almost poetic prose, the theology of 'the Word made flesh', those words that make the hairs on the back of the neck stand up, and now in chapter two we are given a story that would be at home in a 1950's children's book. Perhaps 'Janet and John go to a wedding'. What on earth is our John playing at?

In one of the books we used for Reader training this gospel is described as 'a stream in which children can wade and elephants swim'. That's our hint – maybe we should be looking at this story on two levels.

In the first level it is a cosy story of a family wedding at which Jesus and the disciples are relaxing. There is a problem with the wine and so Mary asks Jesus to help. He does, if reluctantly, and family honour is saved with large quantities of a good vintage.

At the second level every aspect of the story has great depth. Maybe it is time to chase a few elephants.

The first one appears right at the start – on the third day. In our familiarity with the gospel story we recognise the parallel with the passion, on the third day Jesus rose from the dead. John is already hinting that there are elephants in the water.

In our society where people celebrate weddings in many different ways and where people generally pick and choose which of the social customs they will adopt, we need to remember just how cataclysmic it was to run out of wine at a wedding at the time of this incident. This was not something that the two families would laugh about in the future, as they celebrated the birth of a first grandchild. This was the basis of social shame, of ostracization, and apparently in some cases legal action. There were reputations seriously at stake here. Perhaps not quite so much of a cosy domestic story.

The exact relationships are also unclear. Jesus and the disciples were invited, but Mary, in feeling that she must take action, appears to have some sort of organisational role. How close to the host family is she? In appealing to Jesus we have no idea if she thought he had any solution that was out of the ordinary. His, 'my time has not yet come reply', indicates that Jesus at least feels that she was expecting the extraordinary.

And that is what she got. The water jars are huge. If you go to Cana today they will show you tall jars, almost up to my shoulder. Each holds a large quantity of liquid, usually used for ritual washing. The servants fill them, and somehow without a specific word or gesture the water becomes the best vintage wine. Should we be surprised by this – in most gospel telling Jesus would perform a miracle with a word or a gesture? Maybe no-one noticed. Contrary to normal custom the best wine is served not first but last.

This week in his regular message Bishop Michael reminded us that as result of the servants doing what they were asked, they must surely have wondered how drawing large amounts of water would solve a shortage of wine, there was a massive amount. Obedience leads to abundance.

It is a story that integrates both the ordinary with the extraordinary in a way that can make it difficult to work out which we are seeing. I love the way that despite Jesus implying he will do nothing to help, Mary is confident enough to tell the servants to do whatever he says. How familiar is that concept within our own lives? People refuse to commit but then feel that perhaps they should, and do do something.

Of all the elephants bathing in this stream the one that resonates most with me is the nature of the fluid. What is in the jars begins as ritual washing water, the impervious nature of the stone wear of the jars adding to its 'cleanliness'. This water was intended to be used for an act reflecting the Jewish cleanliness rituals. After its transformation the liquid is wine which forms a central part of the key Christian ritual of communion. (This isn't the place to discuss the quality of communion wine, or the virtues of using blackcurrant squash!). That fluid represents the progression from the old rule based relationship with God, to the new more personal one with God's Son. And in the improved vintage we have a foretaste that the new kingdom of heaven is better than the ancient world, and something that we should look forward to.

What began as almost a children's story, about a familial and everyday event, has turned into a deeply meaningful sign, the first such sign, of what the legacy of Jesus life would be – the remembrance of him in the communion service. The God of the everyday leading to the God of the miraculous.

In some of our services we ask the congregation about their wow moments, when God has been particularly obvious in their lives. Some people see God everywhere, in nature, in other people, but for others his presence in the ordinary is less obvious. This story of water being turned to wine is a reminder to us all that God is present in the everyday, and that wherever we are in our own life journeys the best vintage may be yet to come. In the new wine Jesus gives us hope for the future. From our obedience will come great joy.