

Sunday 21st January

Genesis 14:17-20; Revelation 19:6-10; John 2:1-11

Years ago I was on a pilgrimage to Israel and we visited the village of Cana in Galilee. In the village there was the obligatory church that had been built to mark the holy site, and also the even more obligatory gift shop. Now it has to be said that in some places in the Holy Land the gift shops were selling some genuinely attractive items – such as nativity sets carved from olive wood which were on sale around Bethlehem – but here they were selling Cana wine. And one thing's for sure – this wine was not left over from Jesus' miracle as depicted in John. Indeed, I would think even the cheapest wine in Tesco's would be of better quality – but that didn't stop the wine from selling well (and yes, I admit, I bought a bottle too).

But it begs the questions - what is the Water into Wine story in the gospel reading all about?

It's the first miracle that is recorded in John's gospel and in many ways is the hardest to fathom.

But before we can begin to answer the question we would do well to look at the way John puts his gospel together, and at some of the differences between his gospel and the other 3 accounts of Jesus' life – Matthew, Mark and Luke.

John's gospel is carefully constructed around 7 miracle stories which he calls signs. We can see this in verse 11 of today's reading – **Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.**

The other six, incidentally, are the Healing the official's son, the healing the lame man, the feeding the 5000, Jesus walking on the water, the healing the blind man and the raising of Lazarus. Interestingly, only the feeding of the 5000 and the walking on the water appear in the other gospel accounts.

Anyway, the key word here is sign. In what are known as the synoptic gospels (the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke) the miracle stories are stories of incidents where the kingdom of God breaks into the world – essentially acts where Jesus establishes God's reign over the world and the devil.

Demonstrations if you like of the rule of God. But for John they are incidents or signs that point towards Jesus, who he is and his significance.

This difference can be seen quite clearly in the water into wine story. For its hard to see what this story can tell us about the defeat of evil and pain and suffering or the establishment of God's Kingdom. But as we shall see, it can tell us a lot about who Jesus is and what his purpose is.

John uses the word glory here - in today's story – **Jesus did this, the first of his signs, and revealed his glory.** By glory he means much more than the human characteristics of Jesus that we often think of – kindness, love, compassion, caring etc – I think he means those things that point towards his authority, his power and his saving work on the cross. His God-ness if you like. His very substance as the eternal word and son of God.

Its also important to note that by using these stories as 'signs', there is no indication that John sees them as any less historical than the other gospel writers do. In this day and age there is a lot of scepticism about whether the miracles actually occurred (also about whether miracles still occur today). For John, that was not in question. If Jesus was the Word of God, through whom all things were made (as we read in John chapter 1 at Christmas), then him acting outside the physical laws and boundaries is to be expected rather than doubted.

And for us, we can either discount miracle stories and look for a spiritual meaning alone in them, or we can accept the fact that God has the power and, sometimes, the desire to intervene in this world in ways we cannot explain by the laws of science. And I know that some here have had personal experience of God intervening like this.

So this is the first sign that John tells us about in his gospel. But what is this sign pointing towards?

First to note is that elsewhere in the gospels Jesus talks about his message, his purpose being compared to new wine. In Mark 2 he says **no one puts new wine into old wineskins**, referring to the differences between his disciples and the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees, and the new truths he is ushering in. Perhaps the wine made from water in some way refers to this new wine (the wine of the kingdom as we have just sung)

So here, the story is that Jesus is at a wedding in Cana (and interestingly Cana is the home village of Nathanael who we heard about last week). Nathanael – who was sitting under a fig tree when he was called by Jesus and who was doubtful of Jesus’ origins – *can anything good come from Nazareth* he said. And Jesus promised him that **(he would) see heaven and earth opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.** Maybe this is where that begins to happen, not just for Nathanael but for all present. Heaven opened as we see Jesus’ glory revealed.

It might be that Nathanael’s Cana connection is the link between Jesus and this particular wedding; or maybe it’s a family connection – we just don’t know.

What we do know is that the wine ran out. Jewish wedding celebrations were lengthy affairs – lasting perhaps for as long as a week. So it’s easy to see how this might have happened. But this wasn’t simply an inconvenience; it was a social disaster. There would be shame for the family to live with for many a year; and the bride and groom would see it as foretelling bad luck on their marriage.

So we can perhaps understand why Jesus might have intervened. He had compassion on them; he wanted to save them from this disgrace; he wanted their married lives to be blessed. Just as he blesses us today.

We can also see this miracle story as an example of a transformation – the transformation of the ordinary into the extra-ordinary – the water to excellent vintage wine. And we can look to the power of God transforming our ordinary lives; our ordinary selves into extra ordinary lives for God. Taking our gifts, our abilities, our possessions and thoughts and deeds and time transforming them into something special for him.

Alternatively, we can see it as an example of what might happen when we follow, or when others follow, the commands of Jesus. Mary said ‘**Do whatever he tells you**’ and amazing things began to happen when the servants did just that. Perhaps we too can recall how things have changed when we have done what God has told us.

All these are true, all these are valid interpretations. But none of them really begin to explain what John meant by **Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.**

None of these tell us much about who Jesus is and why he came. None of these point towards the glory of Jesus.

So what is John getting at. What does he see this incident pointing towards. What is its significance?

The clues are in the stone water jars - **Standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification**, and in the fact that this is a wedding feast.

The water in those jars was for ritual purification – part of the practice of the Jewish religion - and the transformation of this water into wine – and wine better than the best – is a sign that God is doing a new thing in the person of Jesus. Bringing purification not just to Israel but to the whole world. The whole incident then looks forward to his death.

Several times in his gospel John talks of Jesus' hour, or his time, referring to the crucifixion. Eg in John ch 7, **“they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him because his time had not yet come”**. It's there also in today's reading – Mary asks Jesus to do something about the wine running out and he responds with **“My hour has not yet come”**. Further indication that the whole incident is looking forward to his hour – his death - when forgiveness and purification will be available to all.

And the wedding itself can be seen as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet foretold in Revelation and referred to in many of Jesus's parables.

So the event looks forward to Jesus's death and therefore his resurrection; it points to the saving work of Jesus and it anticipates the final heavenly banquet to which we are all invited because of what Jesus did. It illustrates his glory.

And we can clearly see the many parallels between this miracle, this sign and the last supper. The eucharist which we celebrate today.

- in the transformation of the ordinary into the extra ordinary
- In our following of Jesus' command to do this in remembrance of him
- In the blessing Jesus brings to us all
- And in the mighty act of saving power demonstrated and signified

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

And as we finish, some questions to ponder which arise from this sign, this miracle.

Do we see his glory in the miracle of our transformed lives? Have we experienced his transforming power in our lives?

Do we see his glory in our obeying his command? Do we find a joy and a purpose in doing what he wants?

Do we see his glory as we celebrate his death and resurrection in the communion service? Do we see his glory revealed in his death and resurrection?

And perhaps most important, will we, like his disciples, believe and trust in him?