

## **“The Wedding at Cana”**

*1 May 2022 - Led by David Boyd*

### **Welcome & Call to Worship**

**Hymn of Preparation:** Celebrate

### **Prayers of Adoration & Confession**

**Reading:** John 2:1-11

### **Sermon:**

This short story that we just read describes Jesus' first miracle. It is the first in a series of seven miracles that John calls 'signs' in his Gospel. At the end of the book, in Ch. 20:30, John tells us that, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book." That immediately makes me think then why only give us seven, and in particular, why these seven?

Well, John gives us the answer to that in the very next verse. "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." Clearly, these seven signs reveal that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and in some way call us to faith in him. And those of you who are well up on your biblical numerology will know that the number seven in scripture signifies perfection and completeness.

So, given all of that, this story must give us an insight into just who Jesus is, and what that means for us. Like I said, it's a very short story. We're only given the bare bones, so take note of what is said, as every bit of it is there for a reason.

The first words of the story are important: "On the third day a wedding took place . . ." Big things happen in the Bible "on the third day," most notably the resurrection of Jesus. That gives us a heads up that there is something about this wedding, this wine, which speaks of resurrection, of new creation, of new beginnings and new hope.

Jesus, his disciples and his mum have all been invited. You can just imagine the scene, can't you? Everybody's all dressed up and they're all having a good time when disaster strikes. But all is not lost because Mary knows instinctively what to do. She catches Jesus' eye. "They've no more wine," she says. The obvious implication is that he should do something about this catastrophe.

And so Jesus is pushed into performing his first miracle. Coming up with a solution to the sudden drought.

On the face of it, it seems rather a frivolous way to kick off your new career as a miracle-worker. In the culture of the time, and indeed in our own time, to run out of wine at your wedding is a social embarrassment. It might put a bit of a damper on your wedding day, but it's hardly life and death, is it?

Mind you, I have a son and a daughter both getting married this summer. There are things that are deemed of vital importance that I have never taken under my notice before, and so

when the subject comes up it's usually a good time for me to take the dogs for a walk before I say the wrong thing and end up having to go to A & E.

Mary has put Jesus on the spot here and it's up to him to save the day, not to mention the life of the groom, whose responsibility it was to order enough wine.

But remember John's purpose in writing. "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." He has things of monumental importance to communicate here, it really is life and death. Because he has included this story as his first sign a wedding has a huge part to play in John's agenda of revealing who Jesus is.

In the Old Testament God is often portrayed as a husband with Israel as his unfaithful wife. So, for the Jews a wedding would have carried overtones of their on again, off again relationship with God. Indeed, in the very next chapter John picks up on that as he describes an incident where the disciples of John the Baptist come to their leader to tell him that Jesus is baptising people and everyone is flocking to him. John points out that that is right and proper because "the bride belongs to the bridegroom."

If you think about it, in a fallen, selfish world, at its best, marriage is a sign of love and mutual self-giving. Remember Gen. 2, "for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." Something new is created that is more than the sum of its parts. The two become one.

Clearly, in John's mind, this first sign points to Jesus as the bridegroom who has come to claim his bride, not just Israel this time, but the worldwide church as the new and extended Israel. In the book of Revelation John develops this theme even more when he speaks of seeing "the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband."

That is a picture of the ultimate wedding, the consummation of all things in the marriage of heaven and earth. So, when we celebrate the marriage of a man and a woman we actually celebrate what God intends for the whole of creation. John is painting the first brush strokes of a very big picture here.

But back to the story. When Mary tells Jesus that they have no more wine his response comes as a bit of a shock, v.4. I read from the latest version of the NIV because the older translation was not very accurate here. They tried to soften what Jesus says by translating v.4 as "Dear woman, why do you involve me? My time has not yet come." Thankfully, they changed it to what the Greek actually says in the latest version.

But it doesn't sound like Jesus, does it? It sounds very harsh. Very uncharacteristic. Remember, he's talking to his mum here. You can understand why the NIV translators tried to soften it. But if we have a closer look we can perhaps understand what was in Jesus' mind as he says this. In John's gospel "hour" is a technical term. Every time we see Jesus talking about his "hour" it means the same thing. He's talking about the hour of his death.

You see, all the wedding imagery is not lost on him either. He knows he is the bridegroom and he's come to claim his bride, but he also knows just what it will cost for him to do that. He knows that his wedding will not be possible if he doesn't suffer and die first and what we see here is Jesus' human side. He's feeling the stress because he knows what's coming down the tracks.

But despite the stress and anguish he's feeling, he uses this opportunity to "reveal his glory," as we're told in v.11. He tells the servants to fill the six stone jars with water. They fill them to the brim, right to the top, 600 litres. The servants are probably wondering, "what's going on here? Is he going to take a bath?" But Jesus tells them, "Draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

That must have really stopped them in their tracks, but they do what they're told and imagine their amazement when the master of the banquet pours a glass and holds it up to the light and they see that the water has changed colour. But that's not the only change because he swirls the wine around the glass and sniffs the bouquet. Then he takes a sip and when the wine hits his tastebuds it's obvious to everyone by the expression on his face that this is no ordinary wine.

The thing is that only the servants really know how extraordinary this wine is, because we're told that the master of the banquet has no idea where this amazing wine came from. In fact he calls the bridegroom over and asks him why he has kept the best wine until the end instead of following the usual practice of serving the good wine first and then bringing out the cheap plonk when nobody can tell the difference.

Only the servants know that they just pumped it out of the well two minutes ago, but to everyone else it appears that the groom has just produced 600 litres, that's the equivalent of 800 bottles, of the best wine they have ever tasted. Suddenly, a wedding party that was about to fizzle out has turned into happy hour on steroids! What's going on here? What is Jesus up to?

Well again, we need to take a closer look. The ceremonial water jars that the servants filled with water were used for washing yourself before going to worship in the temple. It was a symbolic cleansing from sin to make them acceptable to God. The problem with that was that it didn't take very long for them to get dirty again.

Jesus changes the water in the ceremonial jars to wine, the symbol of his blood and sacrifice, that really **does** have the power to cleanse us from sin and **keep on** cleansing us from sin, making us acceptable to God for all eternity. It's a visual metaphor for the change from the old covenant to the new.

That is the standard way of preaching on this miracle and indeed the way I have preached it myself in the past. But the more I have thought about this passage, the more this interpretation, while absolutely valid and true, is only half the story. It seems like a convenient deflection from the elephant in the room, and that is the bizarre nature of this miracle.

You see, It's easy for us to understand Jesus' other miracles, healing the blind, the lame and the lepers. Raising Lazarus from the dead also seems kind and compassionate, just the sort of thing that we would expect Jesus to be involved in. But providing more booze for a crowd who have already drunk the place dry is unexpected to say the least!

Listen to what the master of the banquet says to the bridegroom when he tastes this phenomenal wine that Jesus has provided. "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now." Clearly, he's implying that this is a waste of an amazing wine as this crowd are so far gone they won't appreciate what they are drinking.

Now if it had just been another few bottles, fair enough, but another 800! It would be like going to Tesco and clearing out their entire wine section. But that comparison doesn't really work either because we are told that this wine is of extraordinary quality, the sort of wine that you couldn't buy in Tesco because it would be too expensive, even if you were fortunate enough to be able to throw away that kind of money on a bottle of wine.

You probably all read about Brooklyn Beckham's wedding in the news, and your mind just boggled at the millions that were spent on that party. Well, what Jesus was serving up here would have made the Beckhams look like cheapskates!

Look at verse 7. "Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water", so they filled them to the brim." John is making sure that we understand that Jesus produced the maximum amount possible. The jars were overflowing. And therein lies the problem. All through scripture we are continually warned against indulging in too much wine and yet here is Jesus, in his very first miracle, enabling a whole bunch of people to do that very thing. What are we to make of this?

Well, there is no doubt that if you are embarking on any kind of public career, an ability to turn water into high-end wine is a sure-fire way to quickly gather an enthusiastic following. However, the fact that Jesus is a stickler for the law elsewhere, indeed, in many cases giving a stricter interpretation than what was currently in vogue, would seem to mitigate against this being a publicity stunt.

If, as John indicates, the miracles are 'signs' of some sort then he obviously expects us to look past the obvious and find a deeper significance. I have to admit it had me scratching my head for a good while. But then I realised that the interaction with the master of the banquet had to be the key to the meaning. John gives him a lot of airtime in what is a very short story so his pronouncement must be crucial to what John is trying to say.

It struck me that the point John is making when the master of the banquet says about bringing out the cheap wine when the guests have had too much to drink, is that this crowd do not deserve this. They have already had too much to drink. They don't have the capacity to appreciate this amazing wine that they are now being served. This is way too good for them! They don't deserve it!

When I grasped that, I realised that John is talking about grace. Jesus, in providing a vast quantity of amazing wine, the symbol of his own blood, is prefiguring the pouring out of that blood for an undeserving people on the cross. Jesus first miracle is a sign that **this is what God's kingdom is like**. Overflowing with generosity and grace – *the undeserving get the very best*. Yet that very best comes at a very high cost to Jesus himself. It costs him everything!

In this banquet, right at the start of his ministry, he's looking forward to another banquet, the wedding feast of the Lamb, the feast that is only made possible through the shedding of the Lamb's blood. He's inviting us to come and experience God's love. We're not invited to agree to a set of beliefs about God, we're invited to a feast. As the Psalmist says, "taste and see that the Lord is good."

I think that sometimes we place too much emphasis on believing. You can believe all the right things and still not be transformed. You can believe in someone and still not love them. That's why John is so keen on this image of a wedding. He uses it again and again. For us,

marriage is the closest possible human relationship, so for John, it's the closest analogy he could find for our relationship with God.

When Jesus is asked, "Which is the Greatest Commandment?" He doesn't say, "**Believe** in the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." No! He says, **Love** the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

It was love that drove Jesus to die on the cross for us and the only proper response for us, is to return that love. A marriage doesn't work if the love is all one-sided, it only works when the love is mutual between two people committed to each other.

Look at verse 11 again, "This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him." John is not just talking about changing water into wine. The glory is revealed in what the sign signifies, Jesus' readiness to lay down his life for those he loves. For as he says himself, "Greater love has no man than this."

**Praise:** Lord, You Have My Heart

**Announcements**

**Prayers for Others**

**Closing Hymn:** Open the Eyes of My Heart

**Benediction**