

16 January 2022

Isaiah 62:1-5
1 Corinthians 12:1-11
John 2:1-11

It is perhaps ironic that we should have that story from John's gospel in a time when we can't taste the wine of Holy Communion.

A rabbinic tale tells of how, long ago, a prince dreamed of creating more than a geographical or political kingdom. He dreamed of making a community where everyone cared for their neighbour, even at a cost to self. So the prince called a meeting where each chieftain and his clan were invited to join in the foundation of the new society. As part of the beginning of this new community, each was asked to search his cellar for the best wine produced from his ancestral vines. These treasured bottles would be uncorked, poured into a great communal vat and blended into a common vintage.

But one wine grower said to himself: "How can I mix my exquisite wine with that of my neighbours? I would violate my art as a winemaker. Impossible! Give up my distinct variety? Lose my separate self?"

So he corked a bottle of tap water, stuck his most beautiful label on the bottle and, at the time of the ritual, poured the water ceremoniously into the vat. When the covenant was sealed, all filled their glasses for the communal toast. As the cups touched their lips, all knew the truth. It was not wine. It was water.¹

I have not had the privilege of having travelled to the Holy Land, so I have not visited Cana in Galilee. Someone who has tells me that the wine one can purchase there is the vilest plonk imaginable. Someone has remarked that if Christ were to return he might do everyone a favour by changing the wine into water!

¹ <http://www.anglicantaonga.org.nz/Features/courage> Alison Robinson, sermon preached at the installation of Justin Duckworth as Bishop of Wellington. Other variations on the essential story, with different 'morals', can be found at <http://www.bethelsynagogue.org/the-wine-continued/> and <http://www.fairmounttemple.org/2012/09/today-you-tomorrow-me-rabbi-robert-nosanchuk-rosh-hashanah-morning-5773/>

In Jesus' time, a wedding banquet would go on for several days. For the food and drink to run out before the conclusion of the feast would be a huge embarrassment to the bridegroom, the host of the banquet.

On being told about the situation Jesus instructs the servants to fill some large stone jars with water, and then to draw some of the water out of one of the jars and take it to the master of ceremonies.

What must the servants have thought? Here they were, being instructed to take *water* to the master of ceremonies. No doubt there was much anxious talk going on while they topped up the stone jars to the brim. The servants presumably felt that they must obey; but I imagine they might also have discussed some ideas for how they might make excuses in the face of the master of ceremonies' likely confusion or displeasure.

But they did as they were instructed, and took some of the water from the jars to present to the master of ceremonies. I wonder if their hands shook and some water spilt as they nervously took it to him.

Then there was astonishment! The master of ceremonies tasted the wine given to him and was amazed that the host had seen fit to reserve the very finest wine till late in the feast, rather than using the guests' well-lubricated, less-discerning, palates as an opportunity to save money by serving them cheaper wine in the latter stages of the party – as was the common practice.

And the servants were amazed that the water with which they filled the jars had become wine! Surely the master of ceremonies could not be deceived? And perhaps they surreptitiously tasted some themselves to be sure of the case.

And so the party continued, the rest of the guests oblivious to the near disaster and its miraculous resolution. There was now enough wine to go round – more than enough, for Jesus supplied the equivalent of 60 cases, 720 bottles, a vast quantity. It's a lovely story isn't it? And quite a simple one too, really. Jesus shows himself to be a very willing party guest: no severe ascetic of the hair-shirt variety is he.

This passage is sometimes read at weddings: Jesus' participation in the wedding celebration at Cana is taken as an indication of divine favour for weddings, an endorsement or stamp of approval by association.

The story reveals that Jesus has a supernatural command over nature – this is no trick, water has truly become wine. It is a miracle. Such command over nature reminds us of the Creation, and it thus points to Jesus' divine nature. It is Jesus' divine nature that enables him to perform such miracles – to turn water into wine, to cause an amazingly large catch of fish, to multiply loaves and fish, to heal, to resuscitate the dead.

But there is more to it than that. St John the Evangelist concludes the passage by observing that “What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples put their faith in him.” John uses the word “sign”.

When we read of the miracles that Jesus performed it is easy for us to think of them as merely acts of power. Sure, the power derives from Jesus' divinity, but it is tempting to think of Jesus as a bit like Superman deploying a certain superhuman or supernatural ability here and there when the fancy takes him or when he is moved to intervene.

John's use of the word “sign” prompts us to ask “what is signified?” In other words, what is this act of Jesus telling us beyond the mere fact (albeit the important fact) that Jesus has divine power?

The concept of sign is found in the Old Testament where it denotes events that demonstrate the truth of God's word through his prophet, authenticating the prophet himself; and, significantly, it denotes events that herald things to come, especially in relation to God's future plans, the coming of God's kingdom and the end times.

In similar fashion in the Gospels the miracles of Jesus attest that the promise relating to the kingdom of God is made real in and through Jesus.

In the Gospel of John this is taken one step further. These signs are seen as acted parables of the kingdom which is being inaugurated through the saving work of Jesus. They are signs of God's kingdom being made real in the here and now of Jesus' lifetime; they anticipate the kingdom that was to come in the death, resurrection and glorification of Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit upon the Church; and they further anticipate the kingdom that is still to come in Christ's

second coming, the remaking of heaven and earth, and, for the saved, the final resurrection to live within God's new heaven and new earth.²

So what, specifically, does this sign performed at Cana signify?

It is significant that Jesus makes use of the stone jars. John tells us that these were of the kind used to hold water for ceremonial washing. Under the old covenant purification rituals were very important – for example, one would always wash when coming in from the marketplace where one would have been likely to come into contact with Gentiles or with Gentile things. Water for such purposes was kept in stone jars because the stone was thought to keep the water free from impurity, whereas pottery, for example, would not.

Jesus takes the water of the old covenant and turns it into wine. It is a sign that the new covenant being inaugurated in and through Jesus is superior to the old.

The vast abundance of the wine provided, about 60 cases, is significant too. Abundance of wine or oil or milk was an oft-used image of the age of the fulfilment of God's plans, the restoration of God's people under God's reign.

Also significant is the fact that this sign is performed in the context of a feast, a wedding banquet. Feasts and banquets in the Old Testament were signs of God's blessing and joy. And the wedding or marriage image in particular came to be used as a metaphor for the relationship between God and his people. We find this in Isaiah 62, where desolate and deserted Jerusalem's name will be changed to Hephzibah, meaning "my delight is in her", and Beulah, meaning "married".

Jesus himself is repeatedly called a bridegroom. Jesus' earthly ministry is likened to a wedding feast in which those originally invited reject the invitation.

Christ's second coming and the gathering of the faithful into the fullness of Christ's kingdom is also described as a wedding feast, as we find in Revelation 19 and 21.

The use of these images throughout the Bible, the way Jesus behaved, the things that he taught in word and action, all point to the expectation that the feasting, the

² These three paras largely from Beasley-Murray 33.

hospitality, of the kingdom of God will be marked with joy and abundance; it will not be marked with over-scrupulosity; it will not be constrained by the dictates of maintaining status, class or power; it will be open and inclusive; it will not be concerned with receiving favour in return.

In Jesus these kingdom characteristics were already present and being practised. In Christ's church, in our midst, these kingdom characteristics can be present and practiced already – present and practiced in only a *partial* way given that we continue to be sinners living in a sinful world, but present and practiced nonetheless.

There was no miracle in the rabbinic tale of how the supposed “wine” of the chieftains became water, and there is no miracle in the fact that you might be better off with water than with the wine of modern day Cana. These stories have no miracles, but in each of them there is nevertheless a sign.

The fact that each chieftain brings only water to the communal vat speaks of selfishness and lack of humility. There is a meanness of spirit; a lack of willingness to make a sacrifice. It is quite the opposite of the abundance that God demonstrates. The chieftains have not grasped the reality to which the sign of the wine of the common vat was supposed to point.

I don't know the real situation in modern Cana, but it is easy to imagine that traders flogging cheap and nasty plonk are doing so to maximise the profits earned from unsuspecting tourists hoping to capture a memento of the John 2 event. Again it might be selfishness and meanness that is at the heart of the issue; quite the opposite of the quality of God's grace.

We can find the same kind of selfishness of thinking in relation to spiritual gifts. It seems that the people of the church in Corinth had come to regard spiritual gifts as being given for *personal* benefit, and to regard certain spiritual gifts as being more prized than others. The old legalism had been overthrown by Christ – as signified in the water for ritual purification being turned into celebratory wine. It was tragic therefore that a new legalism was growing up that had people saying you must manifest this or that spiritual gift.

Paul asserts that no one gift is to be regarded as more important than another; and that the gifts are not given for personal benefit, but for the good of the community of faith.

And above all, we must remember that they are *gifts*. They are expressions of the abundant generosity of God.

The spiritual gifts are gifts of a generous God, for the good of the community of faith. They are to be received and used with thankfulness and humility, used generously and graciously.

The kingdom of God looks quite different to the sorts of authority structures and social conventions we are accustomed to. The best is not served first, but is saved for now, for just the right time; the wine of the new covenant surpasses the water of the old; it is gracious, gratuitous, generous. In Jesus Christ the kingdom of God was inaugurated, and in turning water into wine at Cana Jesus provided a sign that demonstrated that he was the one who would bring that covenant into being, and demonstrated something of the nature of that coming kingdom. We look forward to its fullness at the end of time, and we participate in making it present in the world here and now.

It is ironic that we speak of water turned into abundant wine at a time when we can't share the wine of Holy Communion. Perhaps its absence is a good time to reflect on what is pointed to in the signs of wine and common cup.

God gives us abundant gifts, like finest wine for the wedding guests. May our lives be like gifts of fine wine to others, not the meanness of mere water, so that we might be a sign of the life of the kingdom of God.

Amen.

Sources

This sermon is a minor revision of one preached in Whanganui in 2013. The works consulted, and in places quoted directly, in the preparation of that sermon were:

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