

19 January 2025

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

*No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate.
But you will be called Hephzibah (my delight is in her),
and your land will be called Beulah (married);
for the Lord will take delight in you, and your land will be married.
As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you;
as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.¹*

Prompted by today's readings, my mind goes back to my wedding day. In May this year, Christine and I will have been married 39 years. As I think back to our wedding day, I am certainly thankful that the wine did *not* run out – although as the celebrations continued there was concern that the bar tab established as my parents' contribution to proceedings would run out, and Dad had to be asked to up the amount.

It all went very well. Christine and I spent our first night together in her home town of Hamilton, joined her family for a lunch the following day, and then happily headed off to Auckland as the first stop on our honeymoon trip around Northland – after a quick stop to remove the tin-cans jangling along behind the car and to wipe down the “Just Married” that had been drawn over the back window.

And it was on that evening in Auckland when things suddenly came plummeting down to earth. I can still picture Christine sitting on the top step from our upstairs motel room, weeping. I wondered what on earth I had done to make her unhappy. Christine was able to tell me that it wasn't my fault; but it took quite some time for it to become clear that the tears – and the months of depression that followed – were the unleashing of feelings bottled up from the years of abuse that she had experienced; feelings that could now be addressed within the safety of marriage. Along with taking a new name, Christine was now freed to start living into a transformed way of being.

¹ Isaiah 62:4-5

I should hasten to add that I too have been transformed through our marriage relationship – having to learn empathy and compassion, having to learn the joy of service, having to learn to recognise and give voice to my feelings, for example. And one important area of transformation for me was my coming to terms with the vulnerability of needing to be honest with my own family about what was happening, grappling with the fear of humiliation and the sense of shame I felt for Christine (something that she did not feel for herself).

All this is the work of our transforming, redeeming, God; all this is a sign of his kingly reign among us.

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 massive humiliation for the bridegroom, the host of the banquet. Of course, we recall that Jesus was to go on to experience the greater humiliation of the cross.

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. They did as they were instructed, and took some of the water from the jars to present to the master of ceremonies.

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 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.

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” though 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.

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 a new covenant is being inaugurated in and through Jesus, redeeming Israel's fractured relationship with God.

The vast abundance of the wine provided 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".

In the Gospels, Jesus himself is repeatedly called a bridegroom, and 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.

At the wedding at Cana, Jesus enacted a sign, an action that signified that he was inaugurating the kingdom of God's reign, which would utterly transform their present identity and reality.

At Cana, Jesus enacted a *sign*: it is not as if he went on to ensure that every wedding had more than enough wine or that bridegrooms would never suffer

embarrassment. In the same way, the transformation that Christine and I have experienced may not necessarily be the experience of all in the present age. For the full outworking of what Christ demonstrated at Cana and in the other sign-acts he performed during his life, for the full outworking of the signs of the in-breaking of the kingdom we see in our own times, we look ahead to the end of the age, to the time prophesied in the last few chapters of Revelation.

But that begs the question of what we do now. Part of the answer is found in the passage from 1 Corinthians 12. If we were to read on to verse 13 we would find Paul talking of being baptized in the Spirit and having the Spirit to drink, which perhaps conjures up the image of the accusations of drunkenness levelled at the disciples on the Day of Pentecost. As Christine and I were to learn when we undertook a *Life in the Spirit* course a couple of years after our wedding, the gifts of the Spirit are given to equip the Church for the exhilarating work of being Christ in the world. We too easily individualise the whole thing, while Paul is emphatically talking about the nature of *community* – the body of Christ, the Church. This is a vital part of the transformational work of Christ among us in our day: over against a highly individualised, selfish, identity-driven society; and over against the name-calling that can occur between one-another within the church, across denominations, and across worship styles; we need to live into the kingdom characteristics of giving our best for the sake of one another, while not despising the gifts others offer us. As with the Corinthian church, Paul calls on us, *together*, to bring our distinctive identity and purpose to full expression right here where we meet together and live.²

In Jesus the characteristics of the kingdom of God were already present and being practised. In Christ's church, in our midst, these kingdom characteristics can be present and practiced already – albeit 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!

As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will our God rejoice over us!

² This last sentence, adapts Crouch, "Commentary on 1 Corinthians 12:1-11".

Sources

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