

John 2:1-11 A sermon preached on 17th January 2016 by Revd Andrew Green at St. Matthias

I am sure everyone has a favourite story of when things went wrong at a wedding. My favourite story concerns Christine who stepped on the hem of her wedding dress at the beginning of the service – and all the fastenings on the back of her dress popped out. To her eternal credit, Christine laughed, the organist kept playing and Christine’s mum came up with safety pins to do a repair job. Disaster was averted!

When Jesus joined the wedding feast at Cana things were about to go very wrong. Now, we should understand that weddings in Jesus’ time were different to such events today. For example, weddings usually lasted a week and also everyone in the village would be invited. For family reputation and honour it was vital that the host was seen to be a good and generous host. Yet here the wine was running out! This was a socially disastrous! Yet into this situation Jesus steps in and John says this first miracle “revealed his glory”.

But here is a question: Saving people from social embarrassment is compassionate - but how does it show God’s glory? Wouldn’t we prefer the first miracle to be something magnificent that met a basic human need – like raising the dead or feeding the hungry? We know that John arranges his Gospel around seven signs (The Greek word is “semeion” – from which we get semaphore.) These signs are signposts in the Gospel indicating that we should look for more than just a surface meaning. In which case, what is that meaning in this miracle?

I want to suggest three reasons why this miracle reveals God’s glory and I also suggest that these three aspects of Christ’s ministry indicate that way God usually works with us. So what we see in this story is the *modus operandi* of God – the way God works today.

1. GLORY IN THE ORDINARY

Seeds of this idea are seen in the first chapter of John where we are told “In beginning was Word..” but then (in vs 14) we are told “The word became flesh” (Gk *sarx*) This is a very course, unflattering, earthy, ordinary word.

This phrase the “word became flesh”, in a sense, sums up the Christmas story. John doesn’t have a Birth Narrative as do Matthew and Luke – instead he says “the word became flesh”. Yes Jesus was not born in a palace, the progeny of humans with royal blood, he does not have a proverbial “silver spoon” in his mouth. Instead he is born in a stable, his human parents are humble working folk – and there is more of a whiff of shame in that rumour of his illegitimate birth! There is not much glory here!

So this 1st miracle shows the way God so often works – through the ordinary and unspectacular. After all, the place, Cana, is an obscure (ordinary) village an afternoon’s walk out of Nazareth. The circumstance of the miracle is something haphazard and ordinary - that is caused by bad planning. Yet in that ordinary place and in that ordinary circumstance Jesus comes and makes a difference. Isn’t that glorious?!

That means that Jesus comes in the ordinary every-day aspects of our lives today. He comes in the ordinary joys. Jesus came to the fun and festivity of this wedding in Cana. He would have drunk the wine and had a dance. So we can say that in our ordinary fun Jesus is there – and that it is right for us to celebrate and know pleasure and joy in our lives.

C H Spurgeon once wrote: ‘I commend cheerfulness to all who would win souls. More flies are caught by honey than with vinegar’. He tells Christians to cheer up!

But Jesus also comes to us in our ordinary troubles. If Jesus helped in the context of a social gaff when the wine ran out - we can expect him to help in our social and domestic needs. There is nothing too small for him to care about – whether it is health issues, work problems or concerns about bringing up kids. God is the God of surprises, because so often we meet him in very ordinary things.

2. GLORY IN THE TRANSFORMATION

This is an obvious theme because, Jesus transformed water into wine. Wow! It was a “creative act”: The whole process of wine making (planting, growing, ripening, harvesting, pressing) was squeezed into a moment. It is the ultimate picture of transformation! It is not the work of a magician – but the work of a Creator God.

But that’s just surface meaning. (Remember “Signs’ are signposts to a deeper meaning!) John says the transformation took place within pots used for ceremonial cleaning. The Jews were always washing hands - before a meal and between each course. They washed with their hands down, then with their hands up! Their religion demanded outward rituals which were onerous, tedious and empty.

So Jesus gives a signal (or sign) of the transformation his ministry will bring. Some things will be made obsolete, some things will be made new. After all, the stone jars can no longer be used for ritual cleaning! They are filled with wine and useless for washing. They are obsolete in Jesus’ kingdom! More than that, the wine was God’s amazing gift of grace – and it has nothing to do with human effort or ritual. It is sign of the kingdom and its newness.

Jesus was therefore demonstrating his glory in transformation reality. We don’t have to “DO” rituals to be Right with God. He does it all for us - it is a gift (just as this wine was a gift). All this hints at what God is going to do through Jesus. Through Jesus’ work on the cross we are accepted as righteous (we can’t add our own righteousness or any rituals). Jesus has done it all for us.

Bill Hybels contrasts 2 approaches to religion: It is either “Do” or “Done”! Some people here this morning will be thinking of all the things they must DO to make themselves right with God. But this miracle is a signpost that shows God’s glory – of transforming religion from Do... to Done.

As you take wine this morning say “It’s Done”! Jesus has taken my sin and has given me new life as a gift – rather like that wine!

3. GLORY IN THE ABUNDANCE

John tells us a minute detail – for a special reason. He tells us that these six stone water jars held 20-30 gallons. So that means there must have been at least 150 gallons of wine! Enough for a wedding! But also enough to provide a cellar for “newly-weds; a cellar that would last many anniversaries and many christenings. That is what I call abundance!

But there is more than that. This wine is not plonk! It is not Tesco or Sainsbury’s “basic” at £3.99! This is the best of the best of the best. The steward says, “Everyone brings out the choice wines first and then when the guests have drunk too much he brings out the cheaper wines. But you have saved the best till now”.

Here is quality and quantity! We can see hints of what is called the “Messianic Banquet” of heaven. This is a great OT theme, but also a motif that Jesus repeated.

The Bible says: “Things beyond our seeing, things beyond our imagining, things beyond our hearing ... have all been prepared by God for those who love him”. In other words, this life isn’t all we have ... The best he has kept for us. When I see some people’s sorrow in this world, I encourage myself by remembering the best is still in store for us.

Here’s a miracle of abundance – and that shows God’s glory. Indeed, it would be right to say that God’s generosity is his most glorious attribute. The great theologian J I Packer comments, “Generosity is the focal point of God’s moral perfection; ALL God’s other excellencies are concentrated in this...”

Paul wants us to see this generous heart of God and so he says God works in ways “above all we can imagine or ask” (Eph 3)... so he prays that we know ‘the height and length and breadth of the love of Christ’. Jesus himself speaks of our generous God giving to us - “pressed down, shaken together, running over..’

This picture Jesus gives has a personal resonance with me. As a child growing up in rural India we had what we called a “box waller” who went house to house – selling puffed rice. We would bring our containers to him so that he could fill them. But as he poured the cereal into our tins he banged the sides to make sure more cereal could fit in. As he shook and banged the sides the rice settled so yet more could go in. It was “pressed down, shaken together running over”.

That is Jesus’ picture of a generous God “Pressed down, shaken together, running over”. 150 gallons of wine is mega, mega abundance. It’s a sign of the way God acts. He is generous. He is Gracious. He is glorious.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, it is in our fallen nature to doubt this. The very first sin in Eden was a doubt about the generosity and goodness of God. So there will be some here who will think, “God can’t work in ordinary me! He can’t transform me. I can’t know abundance. It is all too fantastic!

I am reminded that when Marco Polo (the 13th Cent Venetian explorer) returned from China – no one believed his fabulous stories. When he lay dying his friends urged him to retract his stories. But he said, “I haven’t told you the half of what I have seen”.

The Bible says, “Things beyond our seeing, things beyond imagining, things beyond our hearing have been prepared by God for those who love him”.

As we start a New Year, in the very ordinary things of life we need to know this is the way God works. God is in the business of taking ordinary thing and ordinary people – and transforming them so we can know abundance.