

Sermon for Sunday 19th January 2025, Year C, Epiphany 2

Preached at St John's Baillieston

John 2:1-11

Sermon

The story of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana is surely one of the most well-known miracle stories in the whole Bible, even if it does only appear in John's gospel. It is the first time Jesus reveals his power, his divinity, and his purpose to his disciples, although his mother, Mary, clearly already knows what he can do – which clearly raises the question: what has she seen that gives her such confidence to say to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.'?

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The story starts making its theological points even before we get to the miracle itself. For example, the wedding takes place on the third day, mirroring the Resurrection to new life which also happens on the third day. And there are six stone water jars for the rite of purification, six being considered the number of imperfection or insufficiency – which is why in Revelation the number of the beast is 666 – triply imperfect! So already the passage is leading us from an imperfect and insufficient religious ritual towards a divine, overflowing generosity. The water is not just transformed into wine, but into the best wine, demonstrating all that God has in store for those who seek him and invite him into their lives.

Perhaps this is all that the gospel-writer intended to say: Jesus's ministry transcends religious rituals that can never fulfil or transform us and supersedes them with a joyous superabundant generosity that is always far more than we can ask for or even dream of.

But those who read the story closely might start to have other questions. Why does Jesus initially refuse to help? And why is he seemingly so rude to his mother,

reminding us perhaps of when he was twelve years old in the temple and oblivious to his parents' distress that he had stayed behind.

Here at the wedding, we're presented with the divine Jesus who could do a miracle to save the blushes of the family hosting the wedding if he wanted to, but who initially resists the invitation. "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."

Because John's gospel is the one that is by far the clearest in believing that Jesus is actually God, we are presented here with what's called the 'scandal of divine reluctance'. God could meet the need in front of him but chooses not to. Why? There are several possible explanations; perhaps it's a frivolous use of divine power to produce more wine for drunken guests; perhaps Jesus does not want to be seen as a divine dispensing machine, producing food and drink on demand; perhaps it is simply a case of timing – God has a plan, and everyone must be patient as it unfolds.

And yet, just as Mary saw people in need and turned immediately to her Son to fulfil it, we too see a whole world in desperate need and we pray to God to meet it, since we have not and perhaps cannot do so ourselves. In our world many people do not have clean water, let alone rich and abundant wine. Should we not cry out for the abundance of God? When so many families, even today, are saying to themselves, "we have no food," where is now the abundance of God? Has the hour still not yet come?

Yes, we can easily and justly blame humanity's selfishness for so many people going without, but even so, how do we reconcile a story of overwhelming and unexpected divine generosity with our world of intense need?

And yet, this is only half the scandal. Why does Jesus, Son of God, full of divine wisdom and power, have to be prompted to meet human need by his mother?

Surely God already knows what God will do and what people need? Why does Jesus need to be persuaded?

Again, theologians come to various conclusions. Perhaps this really isn't how Jesus wanted to start his ministry, but he finds his mother won't take no for an answer. He is human, after all, as well as divine. Perhaps God is still getting used to having a mother who knows best?

Others may argue that God always wants to encourage human compassion and willingness to meet people's needs ourselves. Perhaps Jesus wants to know how committed are we to trusting God? His mother says to the servants, "do whatever he tells you" and Jesus commands them to fill the jars with water. So, before Jesus does the miracle, human beings have already shown enough faith to fill up six massive twenty or thirty gallon water jars. From that perspective, Jesus was always going to do the miracle – he just wanted to offer us the opportunity to participate in it, to have faith in God's providence.

There is yet another possibility about how this all works. Might it be possible that God always wants to be prompted to do miracles among us? Is God always waiting for us to have enough trust that we say to each other, 'Do whatever God tells you.'?

The Wedding at Cana shows us a God who says 'yes' to human happiness and joy, who is willing to bless a party with an overabundance of the best wine, and who is willing to act according to human longing, even if our timing is not always the best. As theologian Robert Brearley notes, "God does not want our religion to be too holy to be happy in."

But this God also prefers not to act unilaterally and alone. This God responds to our conviction and works with us to find solutions. We pray for God to act, and we provide the water; God's work is to transform it into the best wine.

Before the miracle story ends, there is one final point worth noticing. The steward, who tests the new wine and declares it to be the best, does not know where the wine has come from. He recognises that he has received a great gift, but like many people, he does not know the One who has provided it. So often it seems that this is the case, that it is only the lowly servants who are blessed with being part of the miracle, since they were the ones who trusted Jesus and filled the jars. It is they who see most clearly that the source of all our gifts is our Creator's love.