

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 2 Year C 2022

It is with great insight that the Gospel writer John commences his record of Jesus' public ministry with the miracle at Cana. A key way that the Scriptures present Jesus' saving ministry is as the restoration of relationship; of Christ – in his own person – enabling humankind to enjoy life with God. Throughout the Old Testament - in the prophets and elsewhere (including what we hear from Isaiah today) - the image of the wedding is used to speak of the 'marriage' – the *covenant* relationship - between God and his people. The motif of the wedding also speaks *the joy* that comes when human beings come together in love. For Israel understanding their relationship with God, the image of marriage was apt because their relationship with God was understood as a sacred bond. And when things were going right in the relationship, a cause of joy. And so, the idea of covenant relationship and the joy and love that comes from a covenanted union, is a perfect way of expressing something of the victory over sin and the ending of the alienation with God brought about by Christ. So, it is no accident that in John's gospel, Jesus' first public sign takes place at a wedding feast. He is himself the marriage between humanity and divinity. And in himself he will enable our human life to share in God's life.

As we know from this well-loved story, the narrative centres on the issue of the lack of wine. Again, wine in the Old Testament speaks of fecundity, richness, fruitfulness, God's generous provision. The lack of wine then, is a key signal that something is amiss. Without wine, there is something missing in the union, something lacking in the covenant. The celebration we might hope for is disappointed. Something essential in the love and the joy we might hope for is missing. This less than ideal (and in fact embarrassing) situation of course speaks directly to the human condition without Christ's saving work. Without Jesus being able to provide the wine, without him being able to fill our emptiness, there will always be something lacking.

When Mary – or more properly in this Gospel 'the mother of Jesus' - says, *they have no wine* she is speaking precisely to this point. And in this simple phrase *they have no wine* she gives voice to all Israel, and indeed all of us! Without Jesus we are and always will be empty! Without Jesus we run out of joy, of reason to celebrate. Without Jesus we will always be running on empty. Mary here giving voice to the profound truth that without God's life there is in fact no life.

The whole story pivots, and this awkward, embarrassing situation beings to be reversed, when Mary expresses a further profound spiritual truth, perhaps the greatest insight of the entire gospel: *Do whatever he tells you*. Our emptiness, our lack can only begin to be addressed when we obey, when we listen to our Lord. Obedience is probably the most unfashionable of all the spiritual virtues. But the consistent witness of the scriptures, and indeed the striking witness of the saints (through all the ages!), confirms this truth: life with God, progress in the life of faith, maintaining our faith comes only by humble obedience to Christ. Insist on our own way, and that we might have a better idea than what Christ has shown us, or that we could improve what has been preserved in Apostolic Faith, only ever leads to derailment, to undermining our relationship with God.

To illustrate the point we are told, *Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons*, and that at our Lord's command they were filled with water. Not only were the wine barrels empty, even the water barrels were empty! If wine is for celebration and a sign of festivity and fruitfulness, water is a sign of life itself. The basis of life. The essential of life. And even *its vessels* (at his point) were empty. It calls to mind the tiredness and uselessness of a life cut off from God. But it *to this* that Jesus comes to address. The vessels are there. The potential is there. But waiting to be filled.

And so, John importantly tells us, *they filled them up to the brim*. It just shows us the marvelous way we can contribute to the life that God invites us to, calls us to! Even as Christ gives the command, we can cooperate with him. And this is, if you like, what makes obedience to Christ such a positive aspect of our faith. We obey his command. We respond to his will for us. And he accepts and uses what we bring to him! That is how life and fullness comes! *Filling to the brim* is just another way of saying we can bring something to task of human flourishing. God will accept and use what we bring to him. And while this is good and necessary and important, *it is* provisional. Remember, the problem is they have run out wine, not water. What the human family needs is not just the ordinary refreshment and nourishment that water provides but something greater. It needs the joyous, celebratory, intoxicating wine! And indeed, in this, that are not disappointed. After the steward has tasted it, all is revealed: the water is become wine. Jesus has taken something ordinary and unremarkable and made it tasty and intoxicating and worthy of a celebration.

Six large water jars, all full to brim, and all changed into marvelous, wine, indeed the best, all go speak of God's abundance. In fact, it speaks of a super abundance! And it is this which should be one of the marks of *our* religious life, of our faith life. There is something about filling to the brim, and the large quantity of wine, that speaks not only of abundance but also of *excess*, an extravagance even. Something is going to be spilled! But in the life of grace, that doesn't matter! There will always be more! There will always be enough. A Christian life that has responded to God's invitation to life – indeed to share covenant relationship with him – should be a life of this kind of generosity. And our church life as well. And in every aspect. Our time, our talents our money. If someone were to say, those Christians are so mean-spirited, so stingy, so penny counting and calculative, well then something is clearly wrong!

It is worth considering on whether our personal life and our shared life shows this spirit of generosity and excess. Remember, the starting point of the story at Cana is the idea of God restoring his covenant relationship – his marriage - with his people. If we do not *generously* invest in our side of the relationship it is going to show. I saw a little meme – a captioned picture – on the internet recently, of a man submerged in a river, his head just above water. And the fellow crying out, '*the temptation to sin is too great.*' The point being, that yes, succumb to the temptations of sin we will drown. But a second image showed what was beneath water: of the man *sitting* in quite shallow water, and the words: *Never fasts. Doesn't go to confession. Neglects prayer rule. Avoids fellowship. Spends all day online. Stays up until 3am. Gets up late. Fills head with worldly entertainment. Doesn't attend divine liturgy regularly. Doesn't read the bible.* How true! Don't invest in our relationship with God, we *will* be overwhelmed.

The true test of the health of our relationship with God will be our approach to worship. Our worship ought to be a response of generosity, of abundance, to the God who has given so generously, abundantly. And not the minimalist approach which so often passes for Christian observance today. It is *not* worthy of the God who has given us *everything* in Christ. A clock-watching approach, or one which can be begrudging, dismissive, or at times even mocking, does not speak of a faith where the water jars have been filled to the brim! And nor does mistaking excellence and beauty in the service of God as nothing more than human pomp or unnecessary show. We must always be striving for more, for better, for even an extravagance. Give God what we can, and submit that in obedience to his will, then abundance and blessing will flow.