

Epiphany 3: Isaiah 62.1-5; I Corinthians 12.1-11; John 2.1-11

The wedding at Cana is a wonderful story and like all Bible stories we can enjoy it just as it stands. But of course this story has many layers to it and it really benefits from closer inspection. John's Gospel is like a treasure hunt. He lays careful and sometimes cryptic clues for us to find and nothing is wasted. John is very selective in his use of miracles. He describes just seven of them, four of which are unique to this Gospel. And the wedding at Cana is the first on both counts.

John's first clue is that he tells us that this took place on the third day which connects us immediately with the resurrection and the wine of the kingdom. Something extraordinary and new is going on and we should be alert. The wedding in question is rather incidental but it connects us to all those references to weddings in the Old Testament like the one in our first reading. And it also relates to the many parables about banquets that Jesus told. There is something about covenant here. About God's relationship with his people.

The wedding in the story took place in the town that Nathanael came from. It would probably have involved the whole community as well as people from other towns and villages, which is why Mary, her son and his friends had been invited. The cost of weddings these days means that the guest lists tends to be very restricted but in Jesus' time the world and his wife would have been invited. Putting on a wedding was a huge financial burden for families but running out of wine would have meant social disaster.

Mary doesn't get many lines in the Gospels but here she is the one who notices that there may be a problem. And she points it out to Jesus. Jesus' response seems on the surface to be a bit rude. My time has not yet come, he says. But again, this is another of John's clues. It takes us to the end of the Gospel story and Jesus' death on the cross. When his time really has come. For John, the crucifixion is the ultimate moment when heaven and earth meet. And it takes all the faith in the world to see glory in the shame of the cross.

We need Mary's. Not just people who will point out when there is a problem although that's important too. But people who are observant. Who notice what is going on. Who look out for others. And who are willing to give people a nudge. Mary knew that her son was destined to do something incredible but she didn't know exactly what that might be. Jesus by this time was thirty years old. It must have been hard for Mary, waiting for whatever it was to start. And she seems to have given him the nudge he needed. In the church we need people who can nudge others. Who see something in them and encourage them to use their gifts. To explore their vocations. St John's should be a place where we foster vocations of all sorts so we need a lot of Mary's.

Mary ignores Jesus' apparent rudeness. She knows him better than that and she tells the servants to do whatever he tells them. Service is an important part of our discipleship and it is significant that God uses those who are obedient to bring about transformation.

Jesus, who was the guest, suddenly becomes the host in this story. Not in an overbearing 'look at me' sense but in a quiet, caring and serving sense. And it reminds me of some discussions I've been having recently about how we welcome people in church. As members of the congregation I think we often think of ourselves as guests. It takes a while for us to feel that we belong. That this is our church. And that it's our job to welcome others and make sure that they have what they need. And perhaps that's particularly true when we are still getting used to being back in the church building. We tend to think that that is the job of the vicar or the wardens and duty wardens. In a previous church of mine we had welcomers. But one day a new person turned up. They happened to know one of the people who was on the welcome rota but that person was not on duty that day. And the person actually said, 'It's a pity I'm not a welcome today otherwise I could have welcomed you.' Welcoming is

the job of all of us. We need to be sensitive and observant like Mary. As well as being guests at the Lord's table but we are also called to be hosts. It is the task of all of us to make others welcome.

The six stone water jars are huge. Each one held gallons of water. The water in them was used for Jewish rites of purification and for John they represent the old covenant. This miracle is a sign that Jesus is fulfilling the old covenant as well as doing something very new. Giving a foretaste of the heavenly banquet promised to all of God's people. It is significant that this miracle is not about meeting immediate needs. It is not about healing or restoring people to life. There is an abundant extravagance about this miracle which speaks of the extravagance of God's love which is so much greater than we can either imagine or deserve. And it should inspire us to be generous and even profligate in return.

In this miracle, ordinary bathwater is transformed into Chateau Lafitte. This is better than any of the wine that has been served until now. And this again suggests that the new covenant is better than the old. As vicar, I sometimes feel like the master of the banquet as I preside at the Eucharist. In the Eucharist it is my privilege to offer up the lives, the hopes and the prayers of the whole community. I'm aware that what I am offering is extraordinary but I don't always know what it is I'm offering or where it came from. And I think that's particularly true of St John's where many here are trustees or governors or members of committees. Where people volunteer in a wide range of organisations. Where people really are salt and light in the wider world. Transforming ordinary bathwater into the wine of the kingdom. As our second reading from one Corinthians reminds us, all of us have different gifts and are called to different forms of service but we are all called to serve the same God and are empowered by the same Spirit. I hope that we can find ways to celebrate what people do but I suspect that much that goes on will remain known only to God and those who serve.

All the things that you do help to make Christ manifest in the world which is what the Epiphany season is all about. The wedding at Cana stands alongside the visit of the magi and the baptism of Jesus as another sign that in Christ, God is doing a new thing. Bringing light and hope to a world in darkness. In our Gospel today, John encourages us to be alert, open to the signs of God's kingdom breaking through and alive to the tiny miracles that happen all around us. Amen.