

## From Disgrace to Dignity – sermon by Christ Bessant

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*Second Sunday of Epiphany, 17 January 10am Holy Communion at St Lawrence Church*

Exploring the Gospel of John, chapter 2, verses 1 -11

*“On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’ His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’*

*Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, ‘Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.’ So they took it.*

*When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.’ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*

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**My most embarrassing moment at a wedding is when I dropped one of the rings.**

There was no hiding the fact because rings ‘ring out’ as they ding-ding-ding their way across the stone floor, and because of their nice round shape they like to roll off at high speed under the feet of those seated in the pews. My failure was further highlighted by the guests who were then down on the floor trying to find it. At least I was able to make some thin joke to the groom about nearly bring able to get away but not quite!

In the same way as I explained last week, those wedding rings are a visible sign of what lies within – they are for the couple a public seal of inner faithfulness – to give evidence to the great vows, promises and truths which are exchanged on a wedding day.

To pick up once again on the Jesus-side of this idea, our gospel writers – and today it's John – are stringing together many miracle stories as pearls of convincing proof to reassure us about of who Jesus really is. As in all of the messages of Epiphany, my basic aim is the same as John's – which is to provide to you these gospel events as a means to reinforce your faith, sharpen your recognition of Christ, and to strengthen your muscles of Christian service.

So today's demonstration of Jesus tells us the familiar story of his exploits at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. It's that miracle story where the visible sign is when water is turned into wine. John wants us to take two thoughts away from the story: the first is that Jesus has some control over the basic provisions required for life, and secondly that he has the power to bring transformation.

So let's unpick some of the details of the story and try to see how John achieves these two aims. He tells us:

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.'

Well the wine running out at a wedding was a bit embarrassing, but the impression given here is that it was a certainty – that it was always going to run out at some point. The Greek grammar behind the English translation supports that interpretation too. I expect this miracle story was told over and over by people, so maybe it became shaped that way.

Nevertheless, the running out of wine defines the need for some act of Jesus, in just the same way as a healing, or raising from the dead, or feeding of a great crowd. A lack of wine is not quite as urgent as these other miracles you might think, and maybe that is also why Jesus needs a bit of prodding from his mother to do something about it.

Mary it seems has no doubts about what Jesus can do. She has a complete understanding about who her son is, and you may recall those nativity stories recently where all that happened – ‘Mary treasured the memories in her heart.’ As Jesus grew from a boy into a man I’m sure there were many other reasons for Mary to be reminded that indeed this was a very special child.

So now Mary puts Jesus into action, when he apparently does not want to be hassled: ‘Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’ This reluctance could be just a social thing – after all the day was about the wedding couple, not about Jesus himself. But it may be interesting to note that Jesus’ miracles are almost always about the demand of the moment – people usually came to find him, to ask for his power right at the moment of need. <official’s daughter, centurion’s slave>

In our own prayers and needs we too can have faith in a God who will accept us regardless of how inconvenient it might be. Surely there has been in all our lives those dreadful times when disaster strikes suddenly, and it is then that our Heavenly Father can come very close to us indeed. So Mary simply dismisses Jesus complaint and just tells the servants to ‘do whatever he tells you’, with no doubt that Jesus would go.

Now it’s an easy point to miss that, although the dry wine jugs were an embarrassment for the couple, it yet would have affected everyone present at the wedding. They would all have connected to the awkwardness of the situation, but more importantly - also to Jesus’s

miracle. Across all the gospels most of Jesus miracles are for individuals – remember all those healings – but now here all eyes are on Jesus for all their needs to be met, and Jesus was under pressure to perform.

John tells us:

Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim. He then said to them, ‘Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.’ So they took it.

This is the middle bit of the story, the required activity which leads us to the big miracle point of amazement. Yet here is found a very important detail that’s it’s easy to miss, which is those big stone jars. They were between twenty and thirty gallons, and there were six of the jars – so about 150 gallons in all, or 682 litres. That works out as 974 bottles as we know them, or 3,896 standard glasses of wine. Now considering that at the wedding the initial supply had all gone, the implication was that everyone was already very well oiled, so now there is a lot more than just one-for-the-road. It’s actually a massive oversupply. Even if there were a hundred guests at the wedding, they now all have nearly forty glasses more to each get through. It might seem surprising that anyone was able to remember to story at all!

In Luke’s gospel Jesus taught that ‘give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.’

It’s good to know that God is able to bless us far beyond our needs. There is no standard measure of his goodness, no maximum or sensible limit to his love. We too can know that God’s generosity will be far beyond our expectations and our needs.

But let's now come to the final point of this wedding in Cana, which I've summed up in the phrase *'our transformation from disgrace to dignity'*.

There at the wedding was a social calamity, a disaster and a failure of what was right, proper and true. The celebration of the couple was tainted and the work of planning now in ruins. The master of ceremonies – the steward in the story – would have taken the blame, but all would have suffered, and the married couple would have been seriously embarrassed. This chasm of failure we might think of as being like sin – it was certainly a big failure – and there was no way out of it. Both of those attributes are the same for all of our sinfulness. Worst of all was that the memory of the day, which should have been a happy and long memory to cherish, would instead have been a poor memory to try and forget. Again, that is how we might think of sin.

Jesus' actions that day give us a foretaste of the Heavenly banquet. In the same way that we meet at the Lord's table with wine mixed with water, so we too humbly recognise that Jesus Christ has transformed our lives from the disgrace of our sin to the dignity of now being able to now sit with him in celebration. This happens throughout our lives, and indeed here today, but most especially when we finally meet with him face-to-face, when the very best is reserved for us at the last.

John the disciple seems to want to get this message out to us as quickly as possible – the wedding of Cana is only at the start of chapter 2 – so that we can know first and foremost that we can live the story of our whole lives as those able to enjoy constant transformation. The good news is here for us now.

Those who were at the wedding that day would have had an incredible experience and an amazing memory of how this man began to emerge as miracle worker, a teacher and prophet, and ultimately to be recognised as the Son of God. Only a few verses before we were told by John that 'to all

who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God’.

And so may Christ continue to reveal himself to us in such wonderful ways, all though our journey of Epiphany.

Amen