

## Sermon for 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany by Geoffrey Howard, 17<sup>th</sup> January 2016

An African acquaintance once told me how bewildered he had been when a British colleague said he was taking the afternoon off to go to a wedding. *An afternoon!* he exclaimed in disgust, *In Africa weddings last a week.* - and he gave me the impression that with a bit of luck they might even last for a fortnight. An Indian friend's description of his wedding staggered me. For weeks before women members of the family had gathered at the bride's home to cook for the feast. 2,000 guests had been invited, but then the whole village turned out, altogether there were about 5,000 people and, as in Africa, it went on for a week.

A Jewish wedding in our Lord's day would be very much like this. The celebration lasted for days and involved the whole community. It began with a feast, followed by the ceremony itself. Afterwards the bride and groom would be escorted to their new home dressed as a king and queen with crowns on their heads. For a week they kept open house and offered hospitality to all who came to pay them their respects.

It is almost impossible for us to imagine what a massive embarrassment it must have been for the wine to run out on such a public occasion. It would enter into the folk lore of the community; the couple who had failed to meet the most basic of obligations. The marriage would have been given a black mark from its very beginning.

That is precisely the situation the young couple whose marriage we have been reading about this morning would have had to face if Jesus had not retrieved the situation by a miracle, turning water into wine.

Which inevitably in our scientific, technological age presents us with problems. Was there really a wedding in Cana of Galilee? Or is this a fiction dreamed up by the early church? If there was a wedding which Jesus attended, did he really turn water into wine? Or has the Evangelist let his imagination run wild? This miracle raises so many questions.

Except that John does not describe it as *a miracle*. He describes it as *a sign*. An event which points to something other than itself. So - although it is right to question this text, seriously wrestle with it and not to be afraid of the problems it presents - not to see beyond it to where it is pointing is a bit like a weary traveller, desperate to find a refuge for the night, coming across a signpost and becoming so absorbed in it that he loses sight of what it is for and to where it is pointing. The compelling question, beyond all the historical and textual analysis, is, *What is this sign pointing to?* And the answer must be, to the transforming power of Jesus the Christ.

It is no accident that, in John's portrayal, at the beginning of his ministry Jesus was occupied in turning water into wine and that as he was nearing the end of his ministry he should describe himself as *the true vine*, that which draws water from the earth and transforms it into the fruit from which wine is made. From the beginning to the end of his ministry he is concerned with transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary.

One commentator points out that it is of water that we are mostly composed, take it away and little would be left of us, water is the raw material of our humanity. This story points us to our Lord's

transforming power not simply over the raw stuff that came out of the stone jars but over the stuff that our humanity is made from. He shared our human nature that we might share his divine nature. He makes us anew.

He transforms our joyless, lifeless religions into an exuberant celebration. The six cold and empty stone jars, used by the Jews for their rites of purification, are a fitting symbol for much of the Jewish religion of the time. But at the word of Jesus they became springs from which flowed the best wine anyone has ever tasted - the symbol of joy, abandonment, festivity. Time and again in the New Testament the Kingdom is portrayed as a party and the omega point to which all things move as a wedding feast at which the bridegroom is our Lord. Someone has written:

*Thou hast conquered, Oh pale Galilean,  
The world has grown grey with thy breath.*

But this is to miss the Jesus of the Gospels by a million miles. The man of Sorrows was the bringer of joy.

He is the one who transforms death into life. *On the third day*, writes John, *there was a wedding at Cana of Galilee*. On the third day! This resonates with Christian hope: *For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, on the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures.*

A Roman Catholic friend was on pilgrimage in the Holy Land. After supper one night the Jewish guide who was the grandson of an orthodox rabbi asked him a series of questions:

*At Cana, what did Jesus change into wine? Water.*

*How much water? Six stone water-jars.*

*What was the water for? Purification.*

*Purification of what? Hands, arms, head.*

*No. Six stone water-jars is exactly the amount of water required for the purification of a dead body.*

And then the Jewish guide added:

*Jesus turns the tears of desolation into the wine of joy!*

At his touch the icy waters of death become the wine of the kingdom.

This is that which this sign signifies: the transformation of our human nature, the transformation of our dead religions, the transformation of our greatest dread.

*Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.*