

John 2:1-11 (20-1-13)

Have you ever experienced a miracle? About 10 years ago I was the verger at a large church in Cambridge and I was entrusted with the key to the church safe. One Sunday morning, not long after having taken on this role, I took the silver from the safe and set it out on the table for communion. I put the key in my pocket. A little while later, I went to get something else from the safe and I reached into my pocket for the key. It had gone! I turned out all of my pockets...three times. One of these pocket searches took place in front of a trusted witness. It was gone. I panicked. Can you imagine how this was going to go down with my new employer! I prayed...a desperate prayer. I put my hand in my pocket...the key was there! Was that a miracle or was my mind playing tricks on me? Would God really bother about my lost key?

My experience with the re-appearing key is a bit of a strange example of a miracle, but then you could also say that about Jesus' first miracle at Cana, when he turned water into wine.

For John, one of Jesus' closest disciples and the writer of the fourth Gospel, the miracles of Jesus are of critical significance. In fact, you could say that John's Gospel is largely a book about the miracles that Jesus did in the presence of his disciples. The Gospel starts with the attention-grabbing Prologue which boldly claims that the man Jesus is no other than the creator-God who has stepped from eternity into time. We are then introduced to John the Baptist and the first disciples who were witnesses to who Jesus was and what he did and were therefore able to endorse this crazy claim that Jesus was the Son of God.

After this introduction, John goes on to describe and interpret six great miracles, or 'signs', followed by the greatest miracle of all - the resurrection. At the end of his Gospel, in chapter 20, vs. 30 and 31, John gives the reason for this approach:

³⁰Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

This morning's reading from John's Gospel describes the first of these signs and my aim is firstly to consider some of the detail of this eye witness account and then to focus upon three particular observations.

Like many of John's miracle narratives, the story itself is very simple, but the passage is bursting with symbolism. So, for example, the wedding alludes to the biblical idea that the Kingdom of God is like a wedding banquet. The transformation of the water into wine pictures the creator-God in action, replacing the old ways with the new. The wine vividly symbolises the blood of Jesus and his crucifixion and even the opening words "On the third day" is reminiscent of the tradition that Jesus' resurrection took place on the third day.

All of these symbols point us to who Jesus is, but there are also details in the text which suggest that this is an account of an historical event. For example, the wording suggests that Jesus and his disciples were there because of Mary and the fact that Mary knew about the impending social disaster indicates that she was close to the host, perhaps a relative of the bridal couple. It also appears from the text that this event took place before Jesus' public ministry began: for John the Baptist is still alive and it may be that only 5 of the 12 disciples have been called.

Jesus' response to Mary in verse 4 may seem harsh to us: "Woman, what does this have to do with me?". However 'Woman' is not harsh - he uses the same term to Mary when he is talking affectionately to her from the cross. The words "what does this have to do with me?" assert a difference between Mary and himself. Jesus is saying that he acts independently and only when the 'time is right'; he is saying that his complete attention is on God the Father and not on other people or circumstances. God is in control.

Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars with water and to draw some off and take it to the 'master of the feast'. The water has been transformed into wine, but, interestingly, the master does not know where it has come from: he is astonished not because water has become wine, but because the host should provide such a fine quality wine when most of the guests are not in a condition to appreciate it. So, as verse 11 tells us, this miracle resulted in his disciples believing in him, but this is not a public miracle. Jesus reveals his glory discreetly, thereby avoiding clamouring crowds seeking sensational demonstrations of power.

So, this eye witness account is very simple, but it is also packed with symbolism. And on both levels, John is witnessing to us about who Jesus is, so that like the first disciples, we might believe in him. But there are three aspects to this miracle which I would like to focus on in particular.

Firstly, verse six tells us that the 6 stone water jars were for the Jewish rites of purification: Jews would plunge their arms into them up to their elbows before entering a house. This was a matter of ritual purity rather than hygiene and its purpose was to cleanse the people, in case they had come into contact with anything which might have been touched by a Gentile. But the fact that there were six jars is significant, as this is one short of the perfect number 'seven'. This symbolised the imperfect nature of the Jewish purification rituals.

Jesus went on to teach that evil comes from a person's heart and not from what they touch. The water for purification has been replaced with the fine wine of the Gospel. We no longer have to depend upon ritual and ceremonial washing to get right with God because it is the blood of Christ that cleanses us before God.

The challenge for us is this: 'What do we rely upon to be right with God?'. Religious ritual will not cover our sin: going to church, prayer and reading the bible will help us in our journey with God and will help us to grow in our faith, but they will not bring purity before God. Being good will not bring us into a right relationship with God either. The only thing that can do this is putting our trust in the promise of forgiveness through Christ. Do we depend upon religion, or do we depend upon Jesus?

The second challenge for us is symbolised by the immensity of this miracle. We are told that each of these six jars holds 20 or 30 gallons. So, in total, that is at least 120 gallons. That is 726 bottles! 60 cases of fine wine. And if that doesn't make the message clear, we are told that these jars were filled "up to the brim" - they were, in effect, overflowing.

We have here a demonstration of God's grace. Jesus doesn't just solve the problem; his response is an outrageous, lavish, extravagant outpouring of the very best. What is our expectation of God's grace to us? Do we know God as a generous God? And what about us as a church - do we want to experience this kind of grace?

Thirdly, a wedding is a time of joy and celebration and it is significant that Jesus not only attends this wedding feast, but that he blesses it and all of the guests by giving them the means to a great party. Our God is a God of joy and celebration.

He enjoys our company. Not only does he love us, but he likes us. He delights in us. But is this

how we really see him? Or does the awareness of our failings, our weakness and our foolish choices obscure the fact that he rejoices over us?

Also, if God is a God of joy and celebration, as his children, do we reflect his character? Is there a family resemblance? No doubt, the guests at the wedding in Cana were enjoying the celebration and were sharing in the joy of the newly married couple. When we are in a right relationship with God, when we receive his forgiveness and grace, we become a people of joy and celebration too.

So, to conclude, John's eye witness account of Jesus' first miracle was written so that we might believe. But it also demonstrates that the old ceremonial system of purification is being replaced and that it is now Jesus himself who makes us clean before God. Through this miracle we also see something of God's character: that he is a gracious God, a generous God and a God of joy and celebration.

If we have never experienced the outpouring of God's grace in our lives or if the joy of knowing that God delights in us has been lost, then maybe we are depending upon ourselves and our own efforts to get right with God, rather than depending upon the fine wine of God's amazing grace.

Amen.

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