

## **Sermon Sunday 24 January 2021 -**

### **Gospel - John 2: 1-11**

#### **Sermon**

Weddings. I suspect not many of us have had the opportunity to go to a large family wedding this year. There have been a few low-key celebrations over the past 12 months, including a few among our own community here at St Andrew's and St Mary's. But big weddings? Mostly cancelled. In fact, I know of a few couples who have had to put off getting married for the time being.

So it's great to hear about a big wedding this morning. OK, I know that it was 2000 years ago but it sounds like a significant party. Wish we were there. It is a lovely story. Our gospel reading this morning describes Jesus's first miracle. He has just begun his public ministry and has called his disciples and we have this delightful account of their attendance at a village wedding.

We don't know who the bride and groom are, nor what Jesus' relationship to them was. Jesus's mother appears to have had some role in the catering so it might have been a relative. There's some speculation that it is Christ's brother John.

Any Palestinian village a wedding in those days was a great occasion. The ceremony took place late in the evening and after it the young couple were conveyed to their new home. They walked under a canopy and via the longest possible route so that all the villagers could come to their doors and wish them well. They didn't go away for a honeymoon, they stayed at home. And for a week they kept open house and there was continual feasting and rejoicing. Obviously, copious amounts of wine were required.

But at this particular wedding catastrophe strikes. They run out of wine. And Jesus saves the day.

When I was growing up and I used to go to a youth club after church on a Sunday evening and sometimes we'd study Bible passages before going to the pub across the road. And we found it very amusing - but also encouraging - to learn that Jesus launches his public ministry by turning water into wine. What a good bloke to have in your life, we used to joke. I'll come back to that.

So here we are at the wedding in Cana; something has gone horribly wrong. It's a disaster. In the culture of the time, hospitality was a sacred duty. And the hospitality at a wedding feast was expected to be lavish. The newly married couple and their families would never have recovered from the shame and disgrace of running out of wine at their wedding.

It wouldn't be too bad if it happened to us today. When Jenny and I got married four years ago, some of you were there, if you'd been having such a good time that you drank the bar dry, we would just have sent someone down to Tesco or the off licence on the corner to buy a case of Prosecco and a few cans of beer, but they couldn't do that in Palestine way back then.

Jesus' mother, Mary, tells Jesus about the problem – they have no more wine. Obviously she's expecting Jesus to do something about this, even when he responds in a seemingly non-committal way: 'Woman, what's it got to do with me? My hour is not yet come. It's not opening time yet.'

That sounds pretty rude, but in the literal translation from the original Greek, it just reflects the commonplace language of the day. Calling his mother 'woman' was perfectly acceptable. Just before his death, Jesus refers to his mother as 'woman' when he commends her to the care of John.

Her response at the wedding is to simply tell the servants to 'do as he says'. She has total trust in Jesus. And the rest is history: six stone jars of water are turned into wine, the shame of the married couple is saved, the party (we assume) is a success and we see the first sign of Christ in action on earth.

The story is full of symbolism. Jesus turns up at the wedding on the third day. When later do we find him appearing after three days? In Jewish culture, God was often represented by the number seven. By having six stone jars, John is leaving room for Christ, or God on earth, to make up the numbers. And finally, converting these six stone jars of water would have produced 120 - 180 gallons of wine, which is more than enough for a village wedding and this represents the abundance of God's grace and generosity.

The symbolism aside, I take away three other things from this story.

First of all, God is involved in the ordinary everyday events of life. This was a village wedding in rural Galilee. The son of God started his public ministry in a little backwater far removed from centres of power and influence. The

miracle wasn't done ostentatiously to dazzle people. No taking the limelight from the wedding couple. No abracadabra stuff, just a quiet command to the servants to do an everyday job. Only the servants involved and the disciples knew what had happened. He proved to them that he was sovereign lord over the material world God had created, but he was also deeply involved in the concerns of everyday life and able to transform it by his power.

Secondly, I think Mary gives us a model for prayer in times of difficulty. She has a problem. But she doesn't try to persuade Jesus to intervene. She doesn't tell him what she wants done. The wine has already run out, but she's not getting in a flap. She simply presents the need and waits in expectancy. Her trust in Christ doesn't falter in the face of his seeming refusal to act immediately.

And thirdly, Mary says to the servants: *do as Jesus says*. Taken in isolation, that's not a bad maxim for any Christian - do as he says.

Put these three things together and I think we have a very good template for faith in the times we live in.

I don't know about you, but Lockdown 2 is proving harder to cope with than it was in the summer. I'm having that conversation with a lot of people at the moment and I'm sure we could talk about it for the next two hours. But instead let me just finish by sharing something with you.

I read an interesting article recently in the Harvard Business Review called How Resilience Works. We could all do with a bit of resilience now, I'm sure. According to the author Diane Coutu, there are three characteristics that resilient people share:

- Acceptance of reality
- Belief that life is meaningful, so don't give up
- Ability to improvise.

Apply those to characteristics to the people at the wedding at Cana:

- Mary accepts the reality - the wine has run out, she knows that;
- But she believes that life has a meaning, she doesn't give up; Jesus will sort it out;

- And the servants improvise by taking six stone jars of water and serving wine to the Steward.

I would add a fourth characteristic that I think is important to getting through a problem, and that is humour. At Cana, with 120 gallons of wine, I bet there was a lot of laughter.

Take all of that and add it to my first three points: God is involved in the ordinary, everyday events of our lives. We can't tell him what to do but we can present him with a problem and Christ will fix it. We don't know when; we don't know how just like Mary didn't know how or when her problem was going to be solved but she knew that if it was God-given, it would work.

When you're feeling down in Lockdown 2, just read the story of the wedding at Cana. See the joy in the narrative; see the belief of Mary in her son Jesus and remember that God is in the very little details of all our lives.

Amen