

# They Have No Wine

Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> January (2<sup>nd</sup> after Epiphany) - Canon Neil Patterson

Isaiah 62.1-5, 1 Corinthians 12.1-11, John 2.1-11

The wedding at Cana where Jesus turned water into wine is such a familiar story that it may feel as if it has been thoroughly preached-out to most of us. Certainly it feels to me as if, among all the signs and miracles of Jesus, it is the one that gets suggested to us as clergy. It may be that my colleagues often find that people suggest they should heal someone paralysed, raise the dead, or cast out a demon? But I suspect that like me, they just get jocular suggestions that they could do something about this water, to brighten up the party, please!

This brings to mind a particular story to me, and it needs a bit of unpacking, so bear with this. When one is in training for ministry, it is a thing each summer to go to each others' ordinations, particularly those ahead of you at college. These all happen on the same couple of weekends, so it can be a scramble to get to as many as possible, or to associated events. So it was in 2002 that I was in a carful of ordinands (I was not driving, please note) who attended a morning ordination in, I think, St Albans, and then went on to an east London where another friend who had been ordained that morning in Chelmsford was being welcomed at Evensong.

What I recall is that the vicar preached a sermon welcoming our friend as curate. This included repeated, and rather surprising, references to the drinking habits of the parish, and that he would have a hard job keeping up with them. Not only did this feel vaguely inappropriate, but knowing him well, we were fairly sure the opposite would be the case. We went on to the inevitable church hall bunfight and mingled – and, unforgettably, the wine ran out! Whether it was the hard-drinking parishioners or the influx of thirsty ordinands that took them unawares, we felt that left the sermon seeming even sillier. I will leave the story by observing that both vicar and curate are now bishops, so there's hope for us all.

I recount this because it is the only occasion I can easily think of where the wine ran out, and produced something like the sort of social embarrassment that must have been apparent at the wedding in Cana. And because, oddly, that does seem to be at the heart of what Jesus did – he saved a wedding couple from embarrassment, and the chief steward (it would be the 'wedding planner' now). To be sure, wine is a symbol of plenty and rejoicing throughout Scripture, and the great quantity is a sign of the abundance that Jesus brings. But wine is not a *necessity*, and Scripture chimes with all our knowledge that too much wine can be a bad thing either on a specific night or in life in general. It matters in the story because it was expected, and it had run out.

And this leads me on to the odd thought – did Jesus come to save us from social embarrassment? From sin, and death, from meaninglessness and oblivion, from self and from false gods, yes. But from not having enough wine at a party? Or laying out the cutlery wrong or turning up in the wrong sort of dress? It does feel distinctly, as we say, a First World problem. And something maybe peculiar to class- and status-ridden old England? There is a danger that we can stretch the universal impact of the Gospel too far, rather as can happen with the varieties of gifts of the Spirit from our second reading. Just as wisdom, healing, tongues, interpretation are given by the Spirit, we can sometimes blandly assure ourselves that everything

we do – music, liturgy, making the coffee, praying loudly, praying quietly, welcoming people at the door and seeing off the troublemaker, sharing our ‘matters for prayer’ and also dutifully not gossiping – all are given by the Spirit until it becomes meaningless. In the same way, we can risk making Jesus the answer to every issue in life when actually proper medicine, therapy or legal advice may be much more sensible.

But on reflection, perhaps social embarrassment is quite important. Or to put it another way – the feeling that we belong, and we are accepted. We all probably know the experience, at least sometimes, of turning up at an occasion or an event and not being sure what to say or how to behave. I know it happens less to me because I have the free privilege of being a man in a public role, and have got used to doing it. In our staff meeting this week the Dean led a session on racial justice, and among other things reminded us that the *normal* experience for many non-white people in Britain is that *everywhere* they go, the starting point of the internal monologue is, ‘do I fit in here?’ or ‘am I wanted here?’ And that is much deeper than mere social embarrassment – it is about who we are in the world and the meaning of our lives.

And perhaps it was like that for the young couple of Cana whose wedding feast was about to go disastrously wrong, or for their chief steward. They would be remembered and sneered at in their village for the rest of their lives as ‘Nathan and Susannah, whose wedding flopped because they were too mean to get enough wine’ or the steward would be out of a job for ruining the most important family occasion of a generation. And it’s true of course for how people find us as a church. Regulars who know how it all works should never forget what a strange experience it is to walk into a service at the Cathedral or any church for the first time. And how much difference it will make if newcomers go away feeling that they met people who were interested in them and wanted to explain, rather than looking uneasy and saying to themselves, ‘who are they?’

This language of welcome and belonging sings out beautifully from the passage of Isaiah with which we began, and which makes use of a device found here and there throughout Isaiah, of symbolic naming and renaming. There are no capital letters in Hebrew to distinguish proper nouns, but the way it says “termed forsaken” or “called married” suggests that we are to read them as symbolic names. People called you Forsaken and Desolate. Now you are going to be called Married and My Delight Is In Her. Indeed, the Hebrew for both the latter expressions, Beulah and Hephzibah, are sometimes used as names – though I had another college contemporary who had called her daughter Hephzibah, and suspect the beautiful symbolism was not always appreciated when she got home from school.

But this is what is at the heart of Jesus’ great first sign at Cana of Galilee. At that critical moment of marriage, a couple are threatened by failure and disappointment just when it could have the most impact on their sense of self and place in their community that matters. And Jesus challenges his mother, as he does us, to think – does that really matter so much? But because he does understand, and he is compassion itself, he gives the order to the servants to fill the water jars. Not to show off his powers, or to give abundant drunkenness. But to reveal the love for which he had come into the world, and which would carry him to the Cross.