

Sign 1: Water into Wine – John 2: 1-11

Those of you of a certain age will perhaps remember the Saturday evening TV show with Ted Rogers called 3 – 2 – 1. The show was based around three sets of contestants who had to answer clues to work out which of the three final prize doors contained the star prize so that they avoided going home with Dusty Bin! Around the same kind of time Aneka Rice was jumping in and out of helicopters on a program called Treasure Hunt where contestants had to solve clues to get Aneka to the right place before the time ran out. Or perhaps you've been involved in a treasure hunt at a simpler level. Perhaps you've set up clues for your children or their friends to solve around the house or around the park as part of a birthday party. In all of these three examples there is an answer to reveal, whether that be a place to find or treasure to uncover. And in some ways, John's gospel is a little like that. As John gives his account of Jesus' life he peppers his writing with seven signs or clues so that by the end of the gospel we are under no illusions as to who Jesus truly is. And if we do happen to miss it, chapter 20 verses 30 and 31 make John's purpose absolutely clear. Let me read them to you. *"Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But 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."* For John, the greatest treasure of all is discovering who Jesus is so that through faith in him, through believing in him, we may have life in his name.

And so, over the next seven weeks we are going to look at each of these seven signs in turn, beginning today in John chapter 2. And our aim is not just to see who Jesus is, but that our seeing would lead to faith and our faith would bring us life. So, turn with me in your church Bibles to John 2, on page 1064, and let's look at this first sign together.

The wedding in this account takes place in the town of Cana in Galilee on the third day after Jesus had called Philip and Nathanael to follow him. Cana seems to have been a small village some 9 miles north of Nazareth, and given the proximity to where Jesus grew up, no doubt there were family connections to the people being married that day. That's probably why Jesus' mother was there, why Jesus was there, and why a few of Jesus' friends were able to tag along.

Weddings in those days were big affairs, sometimes lasting a whole week and with the whole of the local community invited. Making sure that there was enough food and drink for such large crowd was obviously important. It would be today, but even more so then. For a wedding to have run out of wine would have brought great disgrace and shame upon the groom and his family who were responsible for the refreshments.

But that's what happened. At some point during the celebrations, Jesus' mother turned to him and said "they have no more wine!" There seems to be an implication in her comment that Jesus might be able to do something about it. Now Bible commentators have had a field day with this trying to get inside Mary's head, but it doesn't seem likely that Mary was suggesting that Jesus perform a miracle to save the day, because the Bible makes it clear that Jesus had not performed any miraculous signs prior to this wedding. Perhaps over the previous 30 years Jesus had proved himself time and time again to be a reliable and resourceful son, and so she hoped that Jesus would have a bright idea about what to do. Whatever was going on in her mind, the way Jesus responded was very interesting.

For a start, he didn't call her his mother. He used a term which is difficult to translate into English. The word in our Bibles says 'woman' which might seem to us rather rude or disrespectful, but that isn't implied by this word. The American term 'ma'am' might be better: there is respect here, but distance and

formality as well. But however we might translate it, it does seem that Jesus was gently rebuking Mary for trying to steer his work. The phrase that comes next, *'why do you involve me?'* literally means *"what to me and to you."* It was a phrase used to convey a distance between two parties, as if their ideas, their plans and schemes don't really overlap. And when Jesus continues by saying that his hour has not yet come we start to understand why.

Throughout John's gospel *'the hour'* was the time when Jesus would be fully glorified by the Father, and that would only happen on the cross. A number of times in John's gospel we hear Jesus say that his *hour* has not yet come. But by the time we get to John chapter 13 with his arrest and crucifixion imminent, Jesus says that his *hour* had now come. His *hour* is on the cross, and not before.

Throughout the Gospels Jesus' mother, his disciples, as well as the crowds and the religious establishment, all try and steer Jesus ministry in various ways, but he will not allow it. Jesus may have been the dutiful son for 30 years, but having been baptised in the Jordan by John the Baptist, been tempted in the desert by the Devil he has now set out on his period of public ministry where his focus is doing the will of the Father and dying on the cross for the sins of the world. And neither the gentle hints of his mother nor the threats of baying mobs, would be able to knock him off course.

So Jesus gives Mary a gentle rebuke here, places some distance between them, and lets her know that from now on his mission will take priority over his family. Mary, like everyone else in human history, needs to submit to and approach Jesus in the right way. Mary seems to get the message and in her response in verse 5 tells us what that right way is: *"do whatever he tells you."* In our creed later we will declare that Jesus Christ is Lord; that he is the one with authority and power and Majesty: He is the one whom we need to listen to and obey. Therefore, we must do whatever he tells us.

And the servants do. John continues from verse 6: *"Nearby were six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from 80-120 litres. Jesus said to the servants, 'fill the jars with water'; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, 'now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.'"*

Most homes in those days would have had such water jars for washing. The Jews didn't eat a meal without washing themselves, and since the guests had already washed for the feast the jars were empty, which is why Jesus tells the servants to fill them up.

I wonder what they thought as they drew out some of the water and took it to the master of ceremonies in charge of the banquet? Were they nervous? Or as they drew the water out did they realise that something had changed, because something had! When the master of the banquet tasted the sample he was astonished, because this wasn't just wine, this was the very best wine. This was the kind of wine you served to impress your guests on their arrival and before their sense of taste had been diluted by the quantity of wine and the amount of food they had enjoyed.

It's just sensible, isn't it, to serve the good stuff first. When there were formal dinners at my teacher training college the college wine was brought out, with impressive Bishop Grosseteste College labels on the bottles. But sadly this wasn't the good stuff! In fact, it took two or three glasses before you could start to enjoy it because the wine was so rank! At celebrations the good wine is always served first. But when Jesus turns the water to wine, the new wine is so much better than what they had tasted before. Only a few people knew what had happened, but those who did witnessed the first sign which pointed to Jesus' identity and importance.

As a result, there was no shame for the hosts, and no burden of guilt or embarrassment to bear around the village. But more importantly, John tells us in verse 11 that through signs like this “*Jesus revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.*” Back in verse 51 of the previous chapter Jesus told Nathaniel that he would see Heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man, and figuratively speaking, that is what happened here. In every place where Jesus stood heaven and earth were united in a powerful and tangible bond. And as Jesus performed his miraculous signs the curtain of Heaven was pulled back and we get to glimpse who Jesus is and see some of the glory and majesty that are rightfully his.

It’s only the first sign, and it may be seemingly small and insignificant, but John chooses his seven signs carefully and this miracle is packed with glory and meaning far beyond the saving of a celebration.

For a start it highlights the importance of marriage. That Jesus should perform his first miracle at a wedding is no coincidence. It reaffirms that marriage is part of God’s design for his world and that we ignore or belittle it at our peril.

Secondly the fact that Jesus uses the water from the ceremonial water jars highlights the fact that something new is happening. Through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, a new covenant is brought into being which does away with the need for ceremonial washing because the blood of Jesus cleanses all who come from all their sin. Through faith in Jesus, who died for me, even on my very worst days I am assured of God’s unfailing and unchanging love and mercy towards me. The new wine filling those washing jars is a sign of that.

Thirdly, although this is a seemingly minor miracle, the power of Jesus is simply huge here isn’t it. The miracle happens by an act of his will alone. There is no touch of his hand, no command from his lips; just the settled will of Christ and things change. And since the will of God is for our good, his glory and the growth of his church what hope we have!

But the main point from this account is that through this miraculous sign we see the overflowing goodness of God that is ours in Christ.

So many people see Jesus as a killjoy, Christianity as a straitjacket and church as a prison - and there are plenty of Christians who give evidence to that by how unhappy they look! But that should not be the case. Christians have no excuse for being dour or miserable. The gospel is good news for all people everywhere. Just look what happens here! When the wine runs out, Jesus doesn’t just provide a little, he provides an overabundance of wine. Even if we take the lowest volume of those water jugs, Jesus miraculously provides 480 litres of wine; just under 2500 thousand glasses. Now considering that in those days wine was usually diluted by two or three parts before drinking I hope you can see that Jesus has provided enough wine for this celebration to go on for many weeks to come! What’s more, it’s not just the abundance, it’s the quality. This is the best wine that Jesus provides, not some watered-down, half baked, cheapo Tesco special! This is a proper vintage; a wine for a glorious marriage feast. And when Jesus talks about coming to bring life in all its fullness, a peace which the world cannot bring, and that in those who trust in him there will be a spring of water welling up to eternal life then we can look back to this miracle and know that what he says is true.

Friends the gospel is good news! Jesus is good news! He welcomes all to come, he dies in our place to deal with our sin, he offers us real hope, he pours out his love, he gives us a glorious purpose, he fills us with his Spirit, he opens the gates of glory and he takes us through death. What else are you looking for?

How much time, how much money, how much effort do we put in to seeking lasting peace or endless joy and happiness in things that we know can never provide it? How much? It's not that there is no joy and happiness to be found outside of the things of God, of course there is! God has made a wonderful world with many good gifts, but if we try and seek our ultimate fulfilment, our deepest joy, our lasting pleasure in those things we will be disappointed. And we know that but we keep doing it anyway.

Time and time again we fall for the advertising slogans that tell us that if we just had this, just went on holiday there, or just changed our image to look like this then, then we would finally be happy. But they are empty promises that can never deliver. CS Lewis describes our attempts at seeking real joy and happiness from the things of the world as being like those who play with mud pies in the garden when there is a royal banquet inside waiting for us to enjoy. The Old Testament describes them as trying to drink water from cracked cisterns which have already run dry. But the miracle at Cana points us to the one who is the water of life and the bread of life and who offers us life in all its fulness now and throughout eternity.

And how can that be our experience? By doing what the mother of Jesus told the servants at the wedding: by obeying everything Jesus tells us to do. Half-hearted service and obedience will never reap the rewards and satisfaction we are after. If I want to get really fit then half a diet and a once-weekly 30-minute workout won't get the job done! I know that for many years in my Christian life I was trying to pick and choose the commands to keep and the commands to reject. As a result, God was kept at a distance and I had no real sense of God's love or peace or joy. Perhaps you're in the same boat today.

If we really want to know God, to know Christ, to be changed by the Spirit's work; if we want to know God's overwhelming peace and love and mercy in your soul, to be aware of his wonderful presence in every circumstance, to be able to trust him even when the skies are dark and the storms rage then we must trust him with our all. The storehouses of Heaven are full of the super-abundance of God's blessings, the very best wines of the kingdom, are ready to be poured out on all who do. Will we trust him? Will we obey? Will we drink only from the fountain of eternal life and feed only on the living bread that Jesus offers? God's overabundance is waiting for you when you do!

Now don't misunderstand me: Jesus never promised his disciples an easy life, instead he told them to count the cost and to take up their cross because life as a disciple of Jesus is going to be hard work whilst we live in this fallen world. God's amazing peace isn't just the cherry on the cake it's vital because following Christ in a broken world is tough. The assurance of God's love is so important because as we stand for Christ we will be hated by the world. And God's promises of eternal life are so precious because right now we face ridicule and persecution as we seek our joy in places the world rejects.

But the invitation to taste and see that the Lord is good still hold true. From the wedding in Cana to today, those who have come to Christ and have taken him as their all in all have never once been short-changed or disappointed. Even in the darkest storms, the worst sufferings or the fiercest persecutions God's blessings are far better than anything this world has to offer. In this life and the next none who trust in Christ are remotely disappointed.

So, from where will you seek satisfaction this year? From where are you drinking and feeding to find your joy? You will be seeking it somewhere; where are you searching? Don't waste your time on mud pies or dried up wells: Come to Christ. Drink from his unending stream. Let the wine of the Kingdom fill your soul. The work has been done. The wine is ready. Will you come, will you drink, will you really live? I pray you will. Amen.