

SUNDAY REFLECTIONS

Sunday 24 January 2021 | The Third Sunday of Epiphany

TODAY'S READINGS

Genesis 14.17-20 | Psalm 128 | Revelation 19.6-10 | John 2.1-11



'Wedding at Cana'
by Watanabe Sadao (1968)

‡ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I imagine if I was to ask you to name a miracle recorded in the gospel stories of Jesus' life, the account of the water being turned into wine at the wedding in Cana would feature quite near the top of the list. It's an event in Jesus' life that is quickly associated with what we know of his earthly ministry. Quite literally a good news story where God's presence and power were seen and felt tangibly in a physical and recognised way. Jesus doing a new and exciting thing, much to the bafflement of his fellow wedding guests.

Its always, I find, a really joyous story to share with children when leading collective worship, whose simplicity of faith and seeming amazement at what happens locates us firmly in how the evangelist John wished the story to be understood. A miracle that intentionally frames for us the gospel writer's intention to show us who Jesus was and is and most importantly what his life, death and rising again teaches us about God's involvement in the world and in each of our lives.

If we look at the gospel of John as a whole we find that although we're familiar with the story of the wedding at Cana, those six large stone water jars being transformed into an overflowing quantity superior tasting wine, there is actually another mention of Cana later on in John's account. Towards the end of what we now know as chapter four of the gospel, we are told that after his visit to Jerusalem and then his excursion into non-Jewish Samaritan territory, Jesus returns to his native Galilee and to the town of Cana explicitly referred to as the place where '*he had turned water into wine*'. It is an arrival that isn't unimportant and rather leads on to Jesus being called upon to heal the son of a local royal official whose illness has brought him close to death.

For some biblical scholars this geographical connection between Jesus' two visits to Cana are important, not only because what Jesus does there reveals his identity as Son of God. The one in whom we see the Lord's love and grace made visible. But rather because both events are surrounded by account of Jesus' encounters with individuals from both within and beyond Israel.¹ A prompt to us that in journeying with Christ, we are always being led deeper and deeper into our knowledge and awareness of the divine. The God in whom we glimpse not just the signs, but the ultimate source of goodness and mercy.

In this season of Epiphany such stories of self-revelation are important as we seek to comprehend more fully the beautiful meaning of what the Christmas story, Christ's incarnation, means for us. A message that isn't hidden but rather openly disclosed: in the visit of the Magi to Bethlehem, in the baptism of Jesus by John in the river Jordan, by the invitation of Christ's first disciples to '*come and see*', and today in the water made wine at the wedding banquet of Cana. There is always light in

¹ Moloney, F.J. *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina), p 64.

the darkness and such gospel stories prompt us to remember how that light has dawned in Jesus, in whose loving presence we are invited to abide.

The significance then of the miracle at Cana isn't intended to make us wonder how on earth Jesus turned one hundred and twenty gallons of water into wine, but rather to focus our attention on what the story tells us about the God whom we worship and follow. Our task, in being reminded of what Christ said and did, is to allow our eyes to be opened, to get inside the miracle and so to appreciate with fresh insight the same truth that impelled the gospel writer to share the story with some of the first Christian disciples all those years ago.² So that, in reading and hopefully understanding, just like those early followers of Jesus, our own faith and trust in him might be ignited, confirmed and strengthened.

With all this in mind it is striking to note that John tells us that Jesus' visit to Cana happened '*on the third day*'. A clue that the story is intended to have a bigger meaning than the facts it presents us with. In the same way that Jesus' resurrection three days after his crucifixion and burial brings the renewal of all things, so the events at Cana, '*on the third day*', will anticipate the new creation that Christ comes to bring. From the very beginning as the reader we are invited to expect transformation, that somehow Jesus' actions will help us to understand with greater clarity what God has already done for us, if only we have eyes to see.

This comes to fruition in what happens as we discover from Mary, Jesus' mother, that somehow the wine acquired for the marriage celebration has already run out. Though we don't know very much about what weddings looked like in the first century Palestine, it is likely that the festivities would have continued for a number of days and so to fail in offering hospitality ran the risk of causing great offence. A predicament which sets the scene for the miraculous provision that is to follow, not simply in a demonstration of Jesus' authority, but in the super-abundance of what flows as Jesus' actions allow the wedding feast to continue.

We can perhaps imagine the incredulity of the servants, despite being told by Mary to '*do whatever he tells you*', as they are asked to put to use those six stone jars by filling them with water. And then their shared disbelief and amazement as the steward draws the water and finds that it is in fact wine, far better than that which the guests had already drunk. Such generosity, as the chief steward's words declare, doesn't make any sense, '*everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now*'. A statement that reminds us that miracles aren't performed as ways of reinforcing the sometimes sombre reality of how things are in the here and now, but are rather windows into God's character; where in lavish joy and unrestricted bountifulness we see the topsy-turvy nature of God's kingdom.

² John, J., *The Meaning in the Miracles*, p 25.

In the water made wine there is an evident 'newness' to what Jesus is doing. Such things aren't usual or expected and so don't conform easily to our expectations or our tendency to restrict our hopefulness in what God can accomplish. In this, its telling that despite Jesus' very public action in ensuring the marriage banquet could continue, knowledge of the miracle isn't openly disclosed. Only the servants know where the newly arrived good wine has come from, who together with the disciples come to believe that in Jesus there is *something* worth discovering and *someone* worth following. If we are to understand the meaning of the miracle we need to look beyond simply just how things appear and allow our hearts to be warmed and allow God's love to mould us and shape us into the people whom he calls us to be. A people who find in his Son evidence of his glory and so are enabled to walk in the newness of life that he came to bring.

As we look to the coming weeks and months and the continued progress of the vaccination programme and with it, we hope, the gradual return to brighter and safer days, that message of transformation will be more important than ever.

In our own lives, we will have opportunities to live out with renewed appreciation the faith we proclaim, having faith to discern and declare God's presence in the sometimes hidden and easily passed-over aspects of life. Whilst in our wider society, as the course of the pandemic has exposed the disgrace of so many inequalities which can be easy to ignore. There will be a need for a prophetic witness and honest commitment in refusing a return to how things once were and working instead for a transformative agenda of how things should be.

Such a response will demand something of us all, trusting that the God whose Son changed water into wine will equally renew us, and so use us as bearers and sharers of his glory in all that is to be.

✠ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Collect
for The Third Sunday of Epiphany

Almighty God,
whose Son revealed in signs and miracles
the wonder of your saving presence:
renew your people with your heavenly grace,
and in all our weakness
sustain us by your mighty power;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

New Testament Reading

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunder-peals, crying out,

'Hallelujah!
For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;
to her it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure'—
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

And the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' And he said to me, 'These are true words of God.' Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, 'You must not do that! I am a fellow-servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.'

Revelation 19.6-10

Gospel Reading

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.' Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

John 2.1-11

'Epiphany at Cana'

by Malcolm Guite

Here's an epiphany to have and hold,
A truth that you can taste upon the tongue,
No distant shrines and canopies of gold
Or ladders to be clambered rung by rung,
But here and now, amidst your daily living,
Where you can taste and touch and feel and see,
The spring of love, the fount of all forgiving,
Flows when you need it, rich, abundant, free.

Better than waters of some outer weeping,
That leave you still with all your hidden sin,
Here is a vintage richer for the keeping
That works its transformation from within.
'What price?' you ask me, as we raise the glass,
'It cost our Saviour everything he has.'

Prayers of Intercession
for the season of Epiphany

As we worship the Saviour with joy, we make our prayers to our heavenly Father.

The magi came from the east to worship your Son:
Father, grant to us and to Christians everywhere the spirit of adoration.
Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

The infant Christ received gifts of gold, incense and myrrh:
Father, accept the offering of our hearts and minds.
Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

The kingdoms of this world have become
the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ:
Father, grant an abundance of peace to your world and to all your children.
Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

Your Son shared the life of his home and family at Nazareth:
Father, protect in your love our neighbours,
our families and the communities of which we are a part.
Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

The Holy Family lived in exile and in the shadow of death:
Father, look in mercy on all who are poor and powerless, and all who suffer,
May they know comfort, healing and salvation in body, mind and spirit.
Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

We rejoice that your Son, born for us, is the Resurrection and the Life;
Father, console and bless all those who mourn and grieve,
and give to us the promise of your unfading hope that we, with all the departed,
may at the last come to the unending joy of your eternal kingdom.
Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

Father, we rejoice in our fellowship
with the shepherds, the angels, the magi,
the Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph
and all the faithful departed.
In your unfailing love for us and for all people,
hear and answer our prayers through your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.

THE SUNDAY SUPPLEMENT

CHURCH OF ENGLAND RESOURCES

<https://www.churchofengland.org/>

<https://soundcloud.com/the-church-of-england>

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer>

<https://www.youtube.com/thechurchofengland>

<https://www.youtube.com/c/TheChurchofEngland/videos>



The Church of England Service this week, for this week commemorates the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

The service can be found online here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfD6ZISeg>

DAILY HOPE PHONE LINE

The Church of England has developed a national **free** phone line to help support those who might feel particularly isolated at this time, especially if they have no access to the internet. The phone number is **0800 804 8044** and provides a collection of readings, prayers and hymns that can be listened to, all of which are updated regularly. If you know of anyone who might appreciate this service, please do let them know the phone number and pray that it will be a blessing to many.

