

Reflection from Revd Ali for the 3rd Sunday of the Epiphany

This week's Gospel reading is the first public event in Jesus' ministry recorded in John's Gospel. It is a very homely affair - a village wedding. Jesus, the Word, Jesus Godself, really has come to share life with ordinary human beings.

The action in this reading has become part of our vernacular – 'turning water into wine', is up there with 'walking on water'. Everyday phrases that signify deep biblical truths. I wonder, if that is because the truth behind the phrase is about God being so deeply involved in the life of humanity. The direct action at a wedding or saving someone from drowning. The juxtaposition between the macro and the micro. The Creator of heaven and earth being so intimately involved in an individual person's life.

One of the great pleasures and privileges of being a priest is officiating at weddings. The reading from John is paraphrased in the preface to the wedding service. Reminding the couple that God is interested in them, that God is present with them as they make their vows and God will be with them in all the tiny details of their married life. But interestingly, in all the weddings I have officiated at, it has only once been the Bible reading of choice for the service. Anyway, I wonder if you can picture the scene. There is a party going on. A lavish, once-in-a-lifetime event, as weddings are. There would have been copious amounts of food, decorations and flowers. The guests would have been dressed in their very best. The food and the wine would have been flowing, as hospitality was such an important part of the culture in Jesus' day. Everyone from all around would have been invited, and there was possibly a family connection, as Mary was at the wedding as well as Jesus and his disciples.

The feasting and partying would have been going on for a while, but then a bit of a disaster. The wine ran out. Compared to the reality of daily life lived under an army of occupation, it wasn't the worst thing that could have happened. But it would have been a major embarrassment. If the family hadn't been able to provide adequate hospitality for the wedding they would have faced social disgrace. That disgrace and embarrassment would have dogged the couple's marriage. Not the joyful start to married life that was hoped for. The wedding would have been remembered for all the wrong reasons. A minor domestic issue, but it is into this domestic disaster that Jesus steps. Not willingly at first. His mother nags him a little. She understood how embarrassing the lack of wine would be to her friends and she asks Jesus to help.

Mary knew her Son was special. She had always known that Jesus was special. His conception was announced by an archangel. His natal visitors, shepherds and wise men, told Mary stories of them being drawn inexorably to visit her baby. At his dedication in the temple, two of the oldest and wisest folk recognised him, and the importance that he would have for Israel. When he was child visiting the temple at Passover he remained behind, talking with the learned ones in his Father's house. He'd astounded them with his questions and maturity. All of these things Mary had pondered in her heart. So, she is prompted by the Holy Spirit to ask Jesus for his help.

Jesus tells his mother, that the time to reveal the real nature of his identity has not yet come. But Jesus in his humanity, understood the customs and the social implications of what was happening, so he acts. Discretely, he calls for the servants to fill up the stone water jars that were used for washing. These great vessels held between 20 and 30 gallons of water. Enough to wash all the hands and feet of the wedding guests. They do as Jesus asks, and miraculously the water has been turned into wine. Up to 180 gallons of wine, or about 7 – 800 bottles! And not just 'supermarket plonk'. No, this was the equivalent of a premier grand cru! Jesus instructs the servants to take the wine to the master of the banquet who is amazed. He then speaks to the bridegroom to commend him for the quality of the wine, commenting that usually the good stuff is shared at the beginning of the feast and when people have had a few glasses, the cheaper wine is brought out! The master of the banquet and the bridegroom do not know what has happened. But the day is saved. The celebrations can continue, crisis averted, the family aren't shamed by their lack of hospitality.

The sheer ordinariness and discretion of Jesus' first miracle tells us something of God's interest and involvement in our lives. Jesus could have called for silence and made a great show of 'saving the day'. He could have prayed dramatically for God's help and made a show of God's power. But only the servants and Jesus's closest friends witnessed Jesus' unobtrusive miracle. God's transformational power, evident in the miracle, was quietly delivered with outrageous generosity and grace.

Despite Jesus' initial protestation that his time had not yet come, he cared for the family and the community, so he does what only he can. Jesus demonstrated the overwhelming love and generosity that God has for God's creation by the quality and quantity of the wine. There wasn't just enough but a gracious outpouring of excess. Jesus, right at the beginning of his public ministry, by this first miracle, sets the tone for what his life and ministry was about. The outrageously generous and transformational gift of love that is offered to each of us by God through Jesus Christ.

So, what does this wonderful story of wine and water mean for us today? There is an apocryphal story about a boy learning about this miracle in Sunday School. When he is asked what he has learnt he replies; 'if you want to enjoy your wedding and you like wine, make sure Jesus is there'. A truth for all of us and not just for weddings. Jesus is interested in and wants to be involved in all areas of our lives. Sometimes there is a temptation to put Jesus in an 'emergency-only' box or an 'only-on-a-Sunday' box. But the God of love who created us all, wants a real, living relationship with us all. To be a part of our lives from the moment we wake up, throughout the day, and to watch over us while we sleep. To be the centre of our lives and to transform our lives by his presence.

John tells us in chapter 10 that Jesus has come into the world and into our lives so that we can have life, life in all its fullness. Jesus came into our world to make it possible for the whole of creation to encounter God's love through him. In this first miracle Jesus shows us something of the enormity of God's love for God's creation. God reaches out in love to us *all* and offers us *all* this incredible gift of grace. There's enough of God's love for all of us and still have plenty to spare. God's love is more than we can ever understand, more than we can ever deserve. But the incredible thing, is that it's there and available to all of us. We just need to open our hearts and our minds to receive it.

Amen