

In vino veritas (John 2.1-11)*Epiphany 2*

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In vino veritas – in wine truth. The title of today's sermon was inspired by a cartoon by Michael Leunig (see bulletin). It may have you a little concerned about where I'm heading today, (after all, I did come from a denomination known for 'sherry sipping'!!). So, to begin, let me assure you that although I do appreciate a drop of nice 'red', I'm not about to preach on the benefits of the fruit of the vine. Wine may be celebrated in scripture, but drunkenness is not. To suggest, as the gospel does, that Jesus ushers in the season of 'good wine' does not mean that we should be drinking up big – not literally anyway!! But truth is revealed in this story of water to wine, and it's truth I hope we can imbibe more fully today.

Like all biblical stories, the story of the wedding at Cana rewards careful reading. John begins with a temporal reference that is immediately striking: When you hear the words, '*on the third day*', where does it take you? (... he rose again). It may be a literal time reference here, but John is a sophisticated writer; introducing the story this way, he's helping us to get orientated, as it were, giving us a bearing, pointing where it's heading, which is, to a whole new reality – new life.

In contrast to this heady possibility, the scene itself is remarkably ordinary – we're being told about a wedding feast in Cana in Galilee. Hardly a sophisticated location. Just another little hamlet, really, like Gunning, or in suburban terms... like Lyneham!! Who's wedding was it? We're not told, so it probably doesn't matter. What we are told is that Jesus' mother is there (though she's never named in John) as is Jesus. I see this as another

example of the practice of solidarity (I spoke about last week) – his commitment to *be with* others. A sign too, that he is no kill-joy or wowser (in Aussie slang); he could and did fast, and he could, and did, feast – he was for life...

Anyway, back to the story. In most cultures, weddings are associated with much custom and much expectation. For all the joy, they can be stressful occasions; for all the planning, things can and do go awry, and so they did here, when the wine ran out! A matter of significant embarrassment. Now, in that culture, I understand, it was the groom's responsibility to sort the wine (probably the one thing they were trusted with!!). For this to happen would have been humiliating and shameful, not to mention the dampener it would put on proceedings. John doesn't speak of this but it's there in the background. For some reason, (was it a family wedding?) Jesus' mother steps in. Her response is to tell Jesus. Now again, I'm reading between the lines, but it seems that she expects him to do something about it. Initially, Jesus is disinclined, and indeed, to our ears, his reply sounds like a rebuke: *'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?'* he says, almost as if he's telling her butt out.

The issue, for Jesus, is one of timing: *'My hour has not yet come'*. Now, again, this is the first use of a loaded phrase in John. Later on, Jesus consistently uses the term 'my hour' to speak of his crucifixion. This early in his ministry, it seems that he wants to stay out of the limelight, to work behind the scenes rather than in ways that will draw wider attention. Did his mother get this? Were other words exchanged? We don't know. Judging by her next recorded move she appears neither offended, nor diverted. *'Do whatever he tells you'*, she says to the waiters, seemingly with utter confidence that things will be sorted.

At this point, Jesus complies by instructing the waiters to refill the six stone jars that had (presumably) been used in wedding purification rites. Are we meant to make anything of the mention of the number and use of these jars? Is 6 here, one short of the perfect 7? Is his use of these jars a sign of his intent to supersede existing (imperfect) purification rituals? I'm not sure, though some suggest this. What is clear, is that we're talking about a lot of liquid! In our terms, 6 jars holding 20 to 30 gallons amounts to around 580 litres and translates to at least 700 bottles of wine. That's a lot of wine, a lot of good wine, that's abundance!!

Well, we know what happens, this 'water' is drawn and taken to the chief steward who knows nothing of the background. He tastes and is struck by the quality of this 'wine'! He comments on how counter it is (on such occasions) to keep the best 'til last. Normally, the choice wine comes first, when the guests are more discerning. And, that's the point, isn't it? This isn't about normal, it's about something extraordinary coming to pass.

The story concludes abruptly after this comment, and John wraps up saying that: *'Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.'* Actually, there's a lot in this too. To begin, a 'sign', John's preferred term for what Luke and the others call a 'miracle' or 'act of power', points by definition beyond itself. This event, John says, is a sign (one of seven in his gospel) that points the way to... what?? Well, I've suggested, to truth – to the truth about God's glory – *in vino veritas*. The story of this wine tells the truth about where God's glory is revealed, and pre-eminently it's in the person of Jesus – his words, his action.

So, what?? What does that have to do with us, far removed from these events in space and time? Well, this is where John's closing remark comes in

...: *'and his disciples believed in him'*. Literally, the Greek here should be translated *'and his disciples believed into him'*. In English, we'd never talk about someone *believing into* someone else, but John uses this expression in almost every instance when he's talking about belief. Clearly, it's important, so what did he mean? In his attempts to clarify this question, commentator Frederick Bruner (2012.133) suggests that the expressions: *'put their trust in'* or *'entrusted themselves'* give a truer sense of John's meaning than the more mental sense of adopting a belief. This would explain why John could say this here, even though these disciples had already pledged allegiance to Jesus in the previous chapter. If it was just about mental assent, holding a belief about Jesus, then it wouldn't make sense to say it again – as if it's happening for the first, or even another time? John keeps using this expression, it seems, to teach us that *believing in* (*into*) Jesus is a recurring practice, (like exercising regularly to keep fit). I believe in him today (trust him), in the midst of all it brings. And tomorrow, I do it all again, entrusting myself afresh. And, so it goes – the *practice* of 'believing'.

In this regard, Jesus' mother is an exemplar. When the wine ran out, she knew what to do – she brought it to Jesus, and trusted him. She'd clearly learnt this, and here she is, putting it into practise. It's what we need to do (and keep doing) in our lives, trusting and obeying – doing *'whatever he directs'*.

And, notice too, how he works. In this, and other situations like it, Jesus works (and direct us to work) with what's on offer, with the available resources (six stone jars and some water... five loaves and two fish... two copper coins... a treasured jar of nard, a borrowed donkey, a willing heart, and so on it goes). I *don't* think we can take this text as proof that God will

fix every problem exactly as we direct. I notice, for example, that Mary didn't tell Jesus what to do. Demanding is different to trusting. What John is showing us here, I believe, is that Jesus is not only deserving of trust, but also quite capable of working *with* and *in* our actual circumstances – no matter how difficult and unpromising they appear.

So, what are the wine-failing circumstances in your life, the places where you're running out of what's needed? Where in a personal sense are you needing to trust afresh and be available for transformation? And what about us as a community? In truth, we like many churches are in circumstances that seem to be drying up. Our congregation is ageing, finances are an issue, it's getting harder to keep activities running, and the young ones and wider population seem otherwise engaged... The 'wine' does seem to be running low. What to do? Well, if John were speaking, I imagine he'd encourage us to entrust ourselves afresh and seek to discern and respond faithfully to whatever Jesus says. All the time, assuring us that Jesus can do a lot *with* what's available.

Later today, our church council meets; next week it's the 'futures' committee, both groups are charged with responsibility for discerning what's before us at St Ninian's. That's a big responsibility, and, in light of this story, an exciting privilege, for as we (with them) practise trust and responsiveness we may yet see flowing (and even taste) some very good wine. And, to that I say cheers!!

References

Bruner, DF (2012) *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.