

***That Wedding***

*Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; I Corinthians 12:1-11;*

*John 2:1-11*

Weddings have been described as accidents waiting to happen. From the moment a couple make their commitment to each other and agree to marry, the planning, the expense, the detail seems to take over and it can be hard at times to remember that at the heart of the matrimonial maelstrom is a couple who have pledged their love to each other and want to formalise their relationship within a marriage ceremony.

The foundation of any lasting, respectful, caring relationship has to be love. It is foundational to all human society. Marriage is not the only form of relationship but it remains an important one. As part of the fabric of society, it is therefore inevitable that relationship, and the things that go with relationship, is found on page after page of the Bible. Whether it is relationships between adults, or parent and child, or God and people - the pages of the Bible are well-populated with what constitutes a good relationship, and what constitutes a bad one.

God's desire is to be in a good relationship with His people. We see it in the prophecy of Isaiah where the people, who had walked away from God, had given themselves names like 'Forsaken' and 'Abandoned'. Falling outside the covenant, the special relationship with God was a dangerous and lonely place for the people of Israel. The reality was that the relationship was not broken; but it felt to them as if it was. The people may have changed, but God had not. God's promise of steadfast love remained intact. His people were no longer to be called 'Forsaken', or 'Abandoned'; now it was to be 'The Lord delights in you', and, significantly, 'Married'.

Part of the good news of the Bible is that the good news is offered to people who desperately

need to hear it. In the time of Isaiah, in the time of Jesus, and in our own time. In times of loss and isolation, the good news of God reassures. In times of celebration and joy, the good news of God reassures. We are reassured of God's steadfast love. The reassurance is that God is with us - bound up in the name Immanuel with which Jesus was blessed at birth - God with us. God's presence with us, and God's good news, overflows every situation we are in.

Jesus was with the people of Cana at a wedding. Today Cana is a slightly down-at-heel town in Galilee, just ten miles or so north of Jesus' home town of Nazareth. This event is situated in John's gospel right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It is, as you would expect from John's gospel, filled with symbolism.

The symbols of Cana are many. There is a joyous celebration of relationship at the wedding; there is the old wine running out; there are thirsty wedding guests; there is a nagging mother; there are disciples lurking just out of view but in the crowd at the wedding; there is the abundance of new wine provided by Jesus. The symbolism is layered. It says that the 'old religion' lacked hospitality and vigour, a central plank of Jesus' ministry. We also read that the part of the celebration that Jesus was said to attend was on the third day, perhaps a symbol of the resurrection to come with its gift of new birth and life emerging from death.

In Bible times the bride and groom celebrated their marriage not with a honeymoon but with a seven-day wedding feast at the groom's home. At Cana the wine running out before the party was over was a crisis for the host's family. Jesus' mother noticed (she's never named in John's gospel and only appears here at Cana, and then at the foot of the cross, bookending Jesus' ministry). The mother of Jesus perseveres, like the lovingly pushy Jewish mother she was likely to have been. She sees in her Son that He is one Who could, or should, meet this particular need at Cana. We do not know why; she simply facilitates the sign. It is almost as if she sees through her Son to God, wondering what God had in mind, and persisting until God's mind was

revealed. What **was** in God's mind was abundance. Some might even suggest that Mary posing these questions nudged the Divine. She only said two things: "They have no wine"; and then, "Do whatever He tells you." Reminiscent of that robust faith relationship we read in the Psalms between the believer and the Divine, and reminiscent of the relentless faithfulness of the Magnificat, the mother of Jesus nudged the Divine, and miraculous things happened. John Roth notes: "Religious vitality depends on more than one way of encountering the Divine. None lacks risk and problems, but a religious perspective that allows room for quarrelsome protest against God can, in fact, be an asset and not a hindrance to moral commitments."- The stone jars normally contained water; Jesus fills them with new wine, and vintage wine at that, and reveals that through Him, the presence of God is confirmed all over again, and that God's Kingdom has come. It is a symbol of Jesus bringing vitality to the old religion, and overflowing it with God's reckless abundance.

Jesus at *that* wedding. It is fascinating to note that nobody looked for Jesus until the wine ran out. The old wine had kept people from seeing Jesus. One commentator notes: "Sometimes it is the old, not the empty, that gets in the way of somebody seeking the Lord - old attitudes and actions, old habits and hurts, old insecurities or old information, old rituals and rules that coalesce to create old, dry religion."-

There is an extravagance to this miracle that we are meant to notice, and this challenging sign, only found in John's gospel, makes us stop and think. There is the divine generosity - the stone jars are "filled to the brim." There is almost the hint of magic - could the sign be misinterpreted, are miracles to be 'on demand'? There is the question of Jesus' reluctance to do what He was asked, and His short shrift given to His nameless mother. There is the danger of Jesus being taken for granted. There is the huge question Jesus Himself poses in His statement that His "time has not yet come." And yet still the sign of abundance and generosity and grace. It is as if the presence of God, revealed in Jesus, cannot contain itself and it is, by its nature, bound to

overflow and provide and reveal itself, because that is what God does; that is Who God is.

In this time after Epiphany, what does the story of *that* wedding tell us about God? It tells us of a God Who does not want our religion to be too holy to be happy in. It tells us of a God Who, in Jesus, consistently got close to people to celebrate with them and to be with them. Throughout His ministry Jesus celebrated people and got close to them: people getting married; people healed of disease and deformity; people enjoying meals together. Jesus carried the spirit of celebration and nearness everywhere He went proclaiming the good news of God's mercy, peace and joy. The miracle of Cana manifests God's abundant glory, and places Jesus at the heart of the celebration of life and relationship. Perhaps the message of this story is to remind us that God's nearness is to be celebrated, and that our Churches should be more preoccupied with hospitality and parties, feasts and fun. We should be opening doors and not building barriers, lavishly deploying a doctrine of grace and inclusion, not a joyless and narrowing doctrine of so-called purity. God is revealed at Cana in the actions of Jesus' generous providing that went far beyond what people wanted to what they in truth needed. As a symbol of what the Church could and should be, the invitation and celebration of Cana is irresistible.

"Jesus face is reflected in the pools of flowing wine being poured out for the laughing, happy wedding guests who are present to celebrate life. In these same vats of wine, the faces of the believing disciples are also seen. Because to this sign, the disciples believed in Him."

As long as there is food, music and wine, nobody at the Cana wedding thought about Jesus. The same is true today. Many people only see Jesus when something runs out, or doesn't work, or is broken. But when they went to Him, Jesus took the water they had, and made it into the wine they needed. Might it not be the case that if we today went to Jesus, even with the little that we have, Jesus might desire to perform a similar miracle, exceeding our expectations, and inviting us, and those who are with us, to be with Him, and remain with Him, and join the party.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**

**Amen**