

Relationships

Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11

I wonder what kind of wedding it was, the one at Cana. I wonder what the bride and groom were like. I wonder how long they had known each other. Cana was a small village. Were they childhood sweethearts? Was it an arranged marriage? Was she much younger than him? Were they bringing important assets like work or property or land together and love had little to do with it. Did they even like each other?

What of their families? Who paid for the wedding and where was it held? What was the family connection to Mary, the mother of Jesus (and what had happened to Joseph)? Were Jesus and His disciples (also invited) simply there to make up numbers? Were they there for a free meal and drink? Did they even want to be there or would some of them have been happier at work or at home? Had insufficient wine been ordered in the first place by the servants (a well-to-do wedding, with servants), or had the guests been there for a while and drunk too much?

I wonder so much about this wedding, and the relationships around it.

There are relationships at the heart of this story. The unnamed, unseen wedding couple. The relationships between Jesus and His disciples. The odd relationship between Mary and Jesus.

What kind of relationship did Jesus have with Mary? He did not stay at home; He remained unmarried; He drew attention to Himself and got into trouble with religious and political authorities and was always a worry to her. But she stayed with Him to the end, and beyond, and told much of His story, her story, to Luke, who wrote it down in his gospel. Clearly, there was a strong relationship, and it weathered much over the years.

Relationships are fundamental to the ecology and fabric of life. What constitutes for you a good, happy, honest, worthwhile relationship? Conversely, what would you consider to be the elements of a poor, unhappy, broken relationship? You may want to look around you at the web of relationships that makes up your life: husband, wife, partner, parent, siblings, friends, work

colleagues, neighbours, social media. What about the relationship you have to work, leisure, and money?

At the heart of all relationships is communication: what we say, what we hear, what we notice, and what we do. Relationships have dynamics; relationships require work and attention. This is true for all relationships in life, and true with the relationship that we have with God and with our faith.

Some relationships work, whatever there ups and downs. Some relationships are sweet and wonderful, bringing colour, hopefulness, comfort and delight into our lives. Do you value and appreciate them? Do you pay attention to and notice them? Do you tend them and nurture them? Some relationships are hard work, but ultimately worth it.

Some relationships do not work. Sometimes because we do not pay attention to them and take them for granted. Sometimes because we do not listen or talk, notice or appreciate. Sometimes there is a major issue, within or beyond our control, and that brings a crisis. Other times they simply drift, go stale, and lose their texture. Sometimes they simply do not work, whatever we attempt to do with them.

Reading the story of the wedding at Cana our attention is drawn to the miracle, God's provision, and what it reveals about Jesus, and that is all right. But notice also what goes on around the miracle. In the ordinary relationships, between husband and wife, between mother and Son, between friends, between guests and servants, there are relationships. All are touched in some way by God's presence on that wedding day, and that extraordinary event, which is about God's provision and presence, would have been taken home by everyone who witnessed it, as they wondered about what it meant.

The reading from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah touches on a different kind of relationship, but one of equal importance to people of faith. It has to do with how we relate to God. At the end of a long-term exile, some suggested caused by Israel's unfaithfulness towards God, the children of Israel were bereft. They were in their old land, but no longer felt they were at home. "More painful than captivity or losing one's way is the mental anguish caused by the thought

that those able to help have abandoned the search. A prisoner captured by the enemy, a child separated from parents on a wilderness outing, a sailor lost at sea – in each case dread sets in at the thought that the rescuer has given up the search.”ⁱ They had lost their nation, their identity, their confidence, and their purpose. Drifting, fractious, unable to decide which route ahead would be best, they bickered with each other and lacking in resolve or unity. “A chill was beginning to encircle the hearts of many within the struggling community.”ⁱⁱ

Recovering from a virus last week, I watched enough television coverage of the Brexit debate to jeopardise my recuperation. Brexiteers and Remainers, Unionists and Nationalists taking pot-shots, behaving in often unbelievably childish ways; throwing out one deal, not coming up with something in its place; some willing to talk, but only if red lines were accepted, or rejected; some wanting everything on the table, others wanting nothing on the table; some coming with open minds and hearts, others nurturing hidden motives. I begin to wonder if the Brexit debate isn't so much about how we want to relate to or divorce from Europe, but how we understand ourselves as a nation, as Europeans, Britons and Scots. It is an existential crisis. Whether you agree or not with the Prime Minister, it is one thing to know what we are against, but what in God's name are we for?

In the words of Isaiah, at times it has felt as if we are the 'Forsaken', the 'Desolate'. Never mind the relationship with Europe, which still needs addressing, what about the relationship we are supposed to have within our country? It is crippling us, and maiming us, and there are those who are using this division at so many levels and working it towards our harm, intentionally or unintentionally. When people no longer listen, but shout, or worse, refuse to talk. When people only talk, but are only prepared to do so on their own terms. When so many red lines are being drawn that people are afraid to move their feet, what kind of relationships have broken within our country that we have got to this stage?

When did we stop listening and noticing? When did we stop appreciating and valuing? When did we start giving answers to questions no-one is asking? When did we stop communicating?

The political and media discourse has been poisoned by this lack of communication and relationship. It is affecting the mental health and public action of the nation, as more and more switch off and turn away, and our relationships, all of them, at every level, suffer as a consequence.

There is no glib answer to this, just as there is none to grant a quick fix to any imperilled relationship.

Nevertheless, God remains. Waiting, listening, providing, calling, offering, healing. Who is for the people whose glory has been dimmed, and whose light is being extinguished?

I would say God, through God's relationship with us, individually, and collectively.

People of faith, not immune to the vicissitudes of these days, do not bury their heads in the sand of unrealistic piety. What they do, what **we** do, is seize the moment faithfully if tentatively, to show what it is like to work together, for each other, with each other, despite our differences. If the Church, and any community of faith, can in these fractious days demonstrate not uniformity but unity, then we might show our nervous nation how we might work through today, and look towards tomorrow.

It is what is required in any breaking or broken relationship. We cannot guarantee success; we certainly cannot put things back to the way they used to be; but we can work towards something that brings wholeness, and not harm; stability, and not a world in pieces.

I do not know how these Bible passages will speak to you this morning. Maybe it will be a personal message, looking at the relationships that surround you. Maybe it will be the bigger picture that embraces a wider world. But through these words from centuries ago, God speaks to us about the centrality of good relationships, and what their value is to us and to God.

Above all else God speaks to us that in the central relationship of faith, however near we are, or far we are from God. God is still there. Arms outstretched, waiting, listening, loving. God promises no more; God offers no less.

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

Amen

ⁱ Paul D Hanson, Isaiah 40-66, p226
ⁱⁱ ibid, p227