

## A Strange Story about a Wedding

*John 2: 1-11*

When I was a theological student at St Mark's, here in Canberra, I remember sitting in the common room one day with a group of fellow students discussing the demands of ministry and the challenges ahead of us. One student suggested that it would be very helpful to have included, as part of the curriculum, a special course on learning how to perform miracles – Miracles 101. Thus began a rather lively discussion about which of Jesus' miracles we would find most useful to be able to replicate. One thought that the ability to walk on water would be rather impressive, another suggested that the feeding of the five thousand – making a little go long way, would be very handy. However, being students, most of us thought the ability to turn water into wine would be the one we would go for.

And so we come to the story about a wedding at Cana, which occurs right towards the beginning of John's gospel. It is a strange story – simply told, but leaving us with many questions.

Cana was a small village a few kilometres from Nazareth. There are two towns today that people think might have been the Cana of biblical times. One is 6kms north east of Nazareth, the other is 14kms north. Either way, it was not too far from Jesus' home town. Mary, Jesus and his disciples had been invited to a wedding in the village.

It is easy to just pass over this and move on to what happens next, but these opening verses tell us something important. I wonder, were Mary and Jesus relatives of the bride or groom? Were they close family friends? Mary seems to have some authority within the household, as later she instructs the servants to listen to Jesus, so perhaps she is a respected member of the family. Mary and Jesus are attending a wedding just like you or I might. They are grounded in a local community, a network of family and neighbourly relationships. Jesus is part of the social and cultural fabric of his day. In his ministry and teaching he would certainly challenge the social, cultural and religious values of his time but he did not place himself above them. He was there in the mix and rub of everyday life.

As the wedding celebrations proceed the wine begins to run out and for the bridegroom, the host, this would be deeply embarrassing, a terrible failing on his part to provide hospitality for his guests.

Mary notifies Jesus of the predicament with an expectation that somehow he will act to solve the problem, and this is where things get a little strange. Mary does not seem to be asking Jesus to get a few of his mates together to go out and rustle up some more grog, as we would. There is something else going on here, Mary, perhaps, senses that a definitive moment has arrived, a moment of opportunity. Jesus questions this by replying: What concern is this to you and me? *My hour has not yet come* – literally: it is not time to act.<sup>1</sup>

Mary however, instructs the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them. Now, I don't know whether there are some mother/son issues going on here, or whether Mary has been prompted by God to open the way for Jesus to step forward; in any case, Jesus does respond to the need of the bridegroom, although the bridegroom was not aware of what Jesus was doing. In fact, only the servants knew what had happened, how the new wine came to be there. We can only imagine the excited gossip in the servant's quarters that night!

What does this strange story mean? Why has John included it in his gospel?

For John, the miracles of Jesus were signs, the very revelation of God. This is the first sign that John records in his gospel and it sets the scene or the foundation for all that comes after it, it certainly establishes the disciples' belief in Jesus.

As we read John's gospel in its entirety, we begin to see how different themes are woven throughout the life and ministry of Jesus. From this it would seem that, for John, the wine Jesus offers is symbolic of the inauguration of the kingdom of God, the new age that has dawned with the ministry of Jesus,<sup>2</sup> an age not confined to chronological time but one that is timeless, eternal, kairos time where the past, present and future converge in God.

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<sup>1</sup> Painter, J *The Quest for the Messiah: The History, Literature and Theology of the Johannine Community*. T and T Clark 1993, p190

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p191

The theme of the old becoming new recurs throughout John's writing, and perhaps here, in this story, we have the first movement in this theme. Using the jars reserved for ceremonial washing, Jesus turns water into wine, the best wine. Jesus offers the new, better wine after the old has passed away; God is doing something new, the time of fulfilment has come, the blood of the old covenant becomes the blood of the new covenant in Jesus.

But this is still a strange story in many respects. I, for one, am left wondering about that curious exchange between Mary and Jesus – what was their relationship like, why did Jesus decide to act even though he felt that it wasn't his time to do so?

What can we, in a very different time and culture, glean from this piece of scripture?

Perhaps it can be a reminder to embrace the passing of the times and seasons rather than being afraid of it. The old must pass away before the new can be brought to birth and so change brings both grief and joy, death and new life. There is some reassurance in this for us.

Perhaps there is also a lesson in this story, of the riches of God's provision. So often we spend copious amounts of energy worrying about whether we will have enough, whether we, in ourselves, are enough, and yet God's provision is always far beyond what we could imagine, and we need to trust in God's goodness and faithfulness to us.

This story can also lead us into reflecting upon the fact that we are a part of the new covenant not the old. Our redemption, life and hope are found in the grace of God and what Christ has already done for us; not in what we can achieve ourselves. This frees us to respond to God and to each other in freedom and love; for at the very basic level, this story is about Jesus quietly, compassionately meeting simple human need, and in doing so enables them to offer a ministry of hospitality and celebration.

Over the coming weeks and months it will be very important for us to reflect upon our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. As circumstances gradually change and some things become unfamiliar, it is vital to identify and hold on to the things that are essential in our faith and life together as a community of Christ. We must identify what it is we want to take into the world.

Our Lenten studies will focus on just that – our anchor points in a world of change. I encourage everyone to try and participate in one of the discussion groups when they begin for we need to encourage and learn from one another.

In meantime, let us be thankful and rejoice in the life we have in Christ and our part in bringing the kingdom of God to fulfilment.

The Lord be with you.