

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Seeing Jesus – John 2:1-11 – New Wine

We are reflecting on passages in John's gospel under the overarching theme of 'Seeing Jesus'. Because we want to *see* Jesus – to see who he is, to see what he's like, to see what he does. We previously looked at the passage at the end of chapter 20, where John tells us why he wrote his gospel (see 20:30-31). Thomas and the other disciples were able to see Jesus with the eyes in their heads; but John writes so that people might see Jesus with the eyes of their *hearts*. Although Jesus did lots of signs, John has selected just a few, in order that *we* might be able to read about Jesus, *see Jesus through the text*, believe in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, and have life in Jesus' name.

In fact, that's why the gospels were written – to tell people about Jesus. That's important when we come to a passage like John 2. The first part of the chapter (2:1-11) records Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding. What's that all about? Do we simply say the story teaches us that marriage is a good thing? Or, do we say that when *Jesus* is invited into a marriage, good things happen in that marriage? Many a wedding sermon has been preached along those lines! Or, do we say this story is here to teach us that the occasional glass of wine with a Sunday roast is an okay thing?! (A number of us are glad this story is in Scripture...) Some of these things may be true, but are they the main focus of the passage? How might we know?

In the second part of the chapter (2:12-25), Jesus clears the temple. What do we learn from this? What is the message of the story? Do we *literalise* it, and say this teaches us that we should go into St. Paul's Cathedral and overturn the postcard stands and the bookmark racks? Or do we *internalise* it, and say this passage means that when Jesus comes into our hearts, which are his temples, he cleans all the muck out? Or, do we *moralise* the story, and say simply that it teaches us there is a right and a wrong place for righteous anger?

(Again, a number of us are glad this story is found in Scripture...)

So, what is the passage about? Well, it's quite basic, really – it's about Jesus! Everyone who's got married has a wedding story to tell: something that went wrong, something that someone said or did, something about the weather, the church, the service, the reception. The couple in John 2 certainly had a story to tell their grandchildren! But, of course, the story is not about them or their wedding. There's nothing about the ceremony, or the flowers, or the bride's dress... because it's not about any of those things; it's about *Jesus* – who he is and what he does. We read the passage to see Jesus. And when we do that, we learn a number of significant things about him.

1. The need Jesus meets

John tells us in 2:1 at the start of the passage and in 2:11 at the end of the passage that the wedding took place in 'Cana of Galilee'. Cana was a small village not too far from Nazareth, where Jesus had grown up. It's no surprise, then, as John says in 2:1-2, that 'Jesus mother was there' and that 'Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding'.

Weddings were huge social occasions, which would involve the whole village, and people from nearby villages too, and they could last for up to a week. They were times of great celebration – so much so, that when Jews thought about what heaven would be like or what it would be like when the Messiah finally came, they thought about in terms of a wedding banquet.

But this one wouldn't be remembered for its celebration; this one was about to be remembered for its shame. For they ran out of wine. And running out of wine was not just an embarrassment, it was a social disgrace. The couple would have to live with the shame for the rest of their lives.

Here, then, is the need, and Mary tells Jesus about it (2:3). It's not clear whether she is asking him to do a miracle, especially because this is said to be his first (2:11). But she still turns to him in the moment of need.

How does Jesus respond? 2:4 tells us, and it sounds a bit peculiar. First of all, he addresses her as 'woman', which probably isn't as rude as it sounds to us, even though it does put a bit of distance between Jesus and his mother. I certainly wouldn't get away with calling my mum 'woman'! And then Jesus asks, 'Why do you involve me?' Or, 'what is that to you and me?' Again, it sounds blunt, if not rude; and again, I don't know about you, but I wouldn't get away with speaking to my mum like that! Mums have a way of exercising their authority, of saying, even to their older sons, 'Antony, I see there's still no wallpaper in your hall' (meaning: 'Get some wallpaper in the hall'). But Jesus appears to be drawing a line between himself and his family, just as he does in a few other places in the gospels.

And then Jesus says something else which sounds strange: 'My time has not yet come.' The word 'time' is sometimes translated 'hour'. And as we read on in John's gospel, it crops up a few more times (in 7:6, 30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1), where it becomes clear that the 'hour' refers to the time of Jesus' death and resurrection. His mother is thinking about the immediate crisis at the wedding banquet, but Jesus is thinking of larger things – his 'hour' and its coming. Even so, something about what he says lets her know that he will do something, because Mary tells the servants to do whatever he tells them (2:5).

And so the story goes on (2:6-7): six jars, each holding between 20 and 30 gallons. That works out somewhere between 600 and 900 bottles of wine: imagine that amount of wine in your shopping trolley! And what would the servants have thought. They're to pour it out around the tables, and it's not well water, it's amazing wine (2:8-10).

Jesus meets the need, but in doing so the sign points to a more significant need, and that comes out in our second point.

2. The transformation Jesus brings

What is the sign about? John gives us a major clue in 2:6. The water Jesus turned into wine was that used by the Jews for ceremonial cleansing. The very water that Judaism set apart for cleansing, Jesus transforms! This is important. Jesus doesn't just take *drinking* water and turn it into wonderful wine. He transforms water used for *purification* – water used as part of a process of making sure one stayed right with God. He's replacing the old order with a *new* one, one which he himself brings about, and will bring about when his 'hour' finally arrives. No longer will rituals of purification be necessary; Jesus himself will become the new path to God. And the superiority of the new is commented on by the master of the banquet: the best has come last (2:9-10). John is making the same claim about *Jesus*. God had spoken to his people in the past. But now, in Jesus, the best is being saved until the last (see also Hebrews 1:1-2). God is doing a new thing from within Judaism, bringing purification to his people and to the whole world in a new way – through Jesus.

That's why what follows in chapter 2 is so crucial. It's the cleansing of the temple. The very thing by which forgiveness of sins was thought to come is cleansed by Jesus; and Jesus speaks of his body as the *new* temple, broken down and raised up (2:18-22). The heart of the people's worship has become distorted, and needs cleansing; it needs transforming. And it will be Jesus who does it, through his death and resurrection, when his time finally comes. The old way of relating to God through sacrifices in a temple is now superseded through a new way – Jesus himself, who will be the new temple, the place where we meet God, the place where sacrifice is made, the place where forgiveness of sins will come about.

The best has been saved till now. The water of purification in Cana and the temple in Jerusalem were only ever intended to be shadows of the reality which has now come in Jesus. We relate to God not through rituals but through *relationship*, through the Word made flesh whose body would be broken and then rise again.

This is what we need to take home with us today, and take with us into the week and into every week. What we have in Jesus surpasses *anything* and *everything* we could have anywhere else. What vessels do we treasure? What rituals do we value? What customs do we think matter? The passage tells us that however valuable they might be, Jesus is more valuable still. Those vessels have become obsolete for purification purposes now. Old vessels of purification have been replaced with the new wine of the kingdom.

But there's one more thing to notice...

3. The glory Jesus shows

John has written his gospel so that his readers might see Jesus' signs and believe. In fact, that's what happened for the disciples, as the final verse says (2:11).

What does John mean by 'glory'? Glory is the word that's associated with the tabernacle and the temple in the Old Testament, when God revealed himself to his people (see, e.g., Exodus 24:16; 40:35; 1 Kings 8:11). John has already told us in 1:14 that the 'word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us', and that 'we saw his... *glory*'. Now he tells us again, that through this sign Jesus revealed his glory.

The sign points beyond itself: it *signifies* something. In this case, it tells us that the Messiah has arrived and the messianic banquet has begun. Recall that the messianic age was sometimes described as a great banquet, with wine flowing as a sign of God's blessing (Isaiah 25:6-8). Note that Amos speaks of the great day of salvation as a day when 'new wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills' (9:13). Jeremiah looks forward to a day when 'they will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion', when 'they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord – the grain, the new wine and the oil' (31:12).

That time has arrived with Jesus, the Jesus who reveals his glory. It shouldn't be any surprise that by the time we get to the end of the gospel, Jesus' 'glory' is bound up with his death. The glory of Christ is shown supremely in the cross and resurrection. The radiant glory of God's presence now comes not through the tabernacle or the temple, but through Jesus, and particularly his dying and rising again. It is not the sacrifice of lambs that count, but – when his hour comes – the sacrifice of the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (see 1:29, 36).

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The story is not about marriage, or about wine. Jesus does bless marriages, and he's not against alcohol! But the story is primarily about him – the need he meets, the transformation he brings, and the glory he shows. Like the disciples, may we all see his glory, and believe in him. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 21 January 2007