

“The first sign”

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

Wesley Church, Canberra - 17 January 2010

John 2:1-11

Weddings in Galilee were, and are still, huge events. The whole village will be invited, and the celebrations will go on for a week, culminating in the actual ceremony and a following reception after several days of prior partying. The best man from Nazareth I mentioned in my Children's Talk today was married in Nazareth 3 or 4 years ago, and my daughter and her now husband were there. Sarah was told she needed four different party outfits for the week of celebrations. One of those celebrations, I think one for the women only, was even held in Cana, a village only a few kilometres from Nazareth and not surprisingly, one where there are more than a few wedding reception places offering their services today.

Weddings feature quite strongly in the gospels. There's parables about weddings and the appropriate garb for a wedding, there's references to wedding invitations and bridegrooms and bridesmaids, activities in heaven are even likened to a wedding banquet, and Jesus performs this extraordinary miracle at the wedding in Cana.

It's a strange story really. Even if the whole village is there, 180 gallons of wine, more than 500 litres, is way over the top. There's odd notes about it happening on the third day, about Jesus' hour not yet come, about the steward not knowing where this superior wine has come from but an emphasis that the servants sure knew. The bride and groom are never mentioned, some of the guests are apparently drunk, and Jesus addresses his mother as "Woman". A strange story.

Quite a number of meanings have been drawn from this story. They include:

- it's perfectly acceptable for followers of Jesus to enjoy a party;
- it's perfectly acceptable for followers of Jesus to enjoy good wine, even in substantial quantities (though note it says nothing about cricket and beer!);
- making up for the deficiencies of party hosts by using your abilities, even your miraculous powers if you have such, is fine;
- Mary, the mother of Jesus, had no doubts about Jesus' miraculous powers;
- we should obey our mothers as Jesus did;
- the fact Jesus went to a wedding shows clearly that weddings are considered by God to be a darn good thing;
- this is one David and I have heard many a time - if you, an ordained minister of the Christian church, can't turn water into wine, then you sure are not as good as Jesus!

Now there's some truth in each of those messages which can be drawn from this remarkable miracle. But they are not why this event has made it into John's gospel, and especially those lesser learnings from the event are not why John has included it as the very first activity of Jesus back in Galilee after his appearance alongside John the Baptist and the calling of his first disciples.

The key to understanding what's going on here is in the last verse of the account, and a few verses later. Verse 11 reads "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him". Three things from that:

- one, it's a sign, and a sign points to some deeper truth than just what's presented;
- two, revealing his glory, showing his power, giving evidence he's more than just a carpenter's son from Nazareth, is part of this sign, pointing to a deeper truth;
- and three, the disciples believe, apparently because they have witnessed Jesus' miraculous powers.

Now that's all okay, as far as it goes - but a few verses later, in 2:23-25, John's gospel adds a bit more. It reads: "many believed in his name because they saw the signs he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone: for he himself knew what was in everyone."

Believing in Jesus because he does miracles is not what God actually wants. Such belief is shallow, superficial. If we're dependent constantly on seeing miracles, then that's not a real faith, it's "faith-light". Rather, God wants us to see Jesus' miraculous powers as a sign, pointing to who Jesus is, God's messiah, God's Word, God's gift of love and life and grace and truth, and then for us to open ourselves to enter into a living relationship with this God of love and life. In chapter 3 Jesus meets with Nicodemus and there's this long dialogue about being born again, about life having a very different quality, about believing in Jesus and receiving life, abundant and eternal - and that dialogue concludes with what is perhaps the best known verse of the whole New Testament: "for God so loved the world that he sent his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life".

The sign of turning the water into wine invites us to see who Jesus is, to put our trust in him, and to receive his love for us and his trust in us - and to live life as it's meant to be, full of love and purpose and deep peace, knowing God every day in our lives, and receiving even God's gift of life eternal. The sign of turning water into wine points us to the extraordinary generosity of God, his abundant provision for us, his breadth and depth of caring for us, his desire for us to receive his gifts of love and life, and says to us "enjoy my gifts people, every day".

It's about relationships, an every-day relationship with God. Miracles are a sideshow, the main event is our relationship with God, which is a wellspring of life and love and purpose for us, every day.

receive God's love afresh every day, and believe in the best man, the man from God, who came from Nazareth.

To the glory of God, Amen.