

NEW WINE

→ Just a couple of weeks ago we were thinking about the parable of the Great Feast and noticing that in Luke's gospel parties or feasts are mentioned sixteen times, either because Jesus is telling a story about one or he's present at one. Now much as we may enjoy parties, I wonder if some of us have perhaps lost the mentality of feasting because every meal is a feast where we eat or at least have the possibility of eating slightly more than we should? We don't know what it's like to truly feast because actually we don't know what it's like to be hungry!

.....But for Jesus and his friends things would've been different. They knew the excitement of anticipating a feast. In fact as we acknowledged a couple of weeks ago, when Jesus wasn't preaching or teaching, you were quite likely to find him at a party or some kind of get-together. And what seemed to annoy the Pharisees most of all about that wasn't that Jesus went to so many parties, but that he actually seemed to enjoy himself so much. From their point of view he was having way too much fun!

.....Here at Cana, Jesus performs his first miracle, so I suppose we could say that our faith, in one sense, began at a party. And in the early church, the gatherings of the believers were like parties or love feasts and as the unbelievers looked on they would comment "See how much they love one another!" The quality of the new life that they were experiencing in Christ was overflowing in their parties. And just as we might say that our faith began at a banquet, so it will come to completion at a wedding feast – parties, celebrations, enjoying life – that's a huge element of the life that Christ offers to us.

→ But what of this particular wedding? John is the only gospel writer that tells this story, the only one that records this miracle, so is it really that important or not? Well, John seems to think so doesn't he because this is the story that he uses to mark the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry; a story that establishes Jesus as someone who is generous with his gifts and as someone with power? In a way this story is the first clue that John gives us to who Jesus really is.

.....Reading John's gospel is a little bit like reading a detective story where we are the detectives. As we read this gospel we uncover clues. There are moments of revelation of who Jesus is; signs and words that point to Jesus being the Son of God. And for those who have the eyes to see, Jesus is gradually revealed right throughout the gospel and this miracle of changing water into wine at a wedding in Cana is just the first sign along the way. John writes, "Jesus performed his first miracle in Cana in Galilee; there he revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him."

.....And it's not a sign that has us looking up into the sky or puzzling over things that we don't really understand. It's a sign that encourages us to simply look around us, at the relationships we enjoy, at the happy events that bring communities together and see that Jesus is someone who loves to share in very ordinary human events and celebrations but who also loves to meet the needs of those that he encounters as we saw in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand this morning.

→ Now of course, Jesus' mother plays a very important role in this event. She's the one who apparently, first notices that the wine is running out and she mentions it to him. She doesn't actually ask him to sort matters out but it seems to be implied because Jesus' first response is rather dismissive; a "what do you want me to do about it?" kind of response! We could spend an age discussing why he was so reticent and apparently reluctant to do what she asked, because there could be a number of reasons but in the context of this celebration of the Lord's Supper this evening, I'd like us to think about one possibility and it has to do with the symbolism of wine.

.....When we gather around this table later we will use the wine to symbolise the blood that Jesus poured out on the cross, and it may be that Jesus, in reminding his mother that his "hour had not yet come" was wanting to flag up the fact that there will be another time, down the track somewhere, when he'll offer a different kind of wine to people at a different banquet. He wanted perhaps to point to a time when his blood would actually be shed and because of that people would be able to experience a quality of life and celebration like none they'd ever experienced before.

→ So, he turns water into wine, but there's no great pronouncement from Jesus, no waving of the hands, just a simple request to fill up the water jars. And it seems as if only the disciples and the servants get to be in on the secret and servants usually know when to keep their mouths shut about unusual goings on. You only have to have watched Downton Abbey recently to know all about that! So what can we discover about Jesus, what can we discover about life in the kingdom, what can we discover about God's intentions from this first miracle that Jesus performs?

.....There are about 250 references to wine in God's word, some of them used negatively, others used very positively. There are negative images of drunkenness or of wine being drunk during the worship of idols. But there are also very positive images of harvest and bounty and fruitfulness. Jesus himself uses the image of new wine in new wineskins to refer to the new life of the kingdom and of course, he uses a cup of wine to symbolise the blood that he would shed.

.....In the gospel of John, where this story is found, there's no record of the last supper. Instead in chapter 6 of this gospel Jesus tells a whole crowd of people that he himself is the bread from heaven and later in the gospel in chapter 15 we find the wine symbolism again when Jesus speaks of himself as the vine. So, would it be too far fetched to suggest that this miracle of the water being turned into wine could also be seen as John trying to weave part of the symbolism of the last supper into an earlier part of the story?

.....If that's the case he may have had to rely on his readers being aware of the symbolism of the wine in the other gospels and of the practice of the Lord's Supper in the early Christian communities. But if they were aware of those things then they may well have picked up a message from Jesus in this story that says "when you participate in what I'm doing, you get the good stuff, the best wine! And that wine is me, my generosity, my life poured out for you!"

.....But there's another really powerful image here too and that has to do with the water jars. These jars were there to enable the partygoers to fulfil the Jewish rites of purification; the washing before meals and after each course. You may remember that Luke records in chapter 11 of his gospel how the Pharisees told Jesus off for not following the rules about ritual washing fully enough. But here these jars are transformed from items that helped people to fulfil the law into vessels containing a celebratory drink that symbolises beauty and bounty. So the old water of the Jewish ritual codes has been transformed into the new wine of God's grace; in turning water into wine Jesus has provided the promise of a renewed, full life for these partygoers and all other partygoers in the future, including you and me.

→ So, there really are some powerful images here, and we need to take more away with us from this story than the useful advice that "it's good to listen to your mother" or "make sure you have Jesus on your party guest list!" This is a miracle story that speaks to us about transformation and not just the transformation of water into wine, but the transformation that can happen in us, in you and me!

.....Firstly perhaps, this miracle speaks to us about the fact that life with Jesus is about more and not less. It's never about what we stop doing or what we cut out of our lives. Our life with Jesus should never be defined by what we don't do, at least not entirely, but rather our life with Jesus ought to be described by the things we do get involved in and participate in and are passionate about. Because life with Jesus is meant to be full; it's meant to be enjoyed. Of course, it will include times when problems arise, just as they did at this wedding banquet. Embarrassment and shame was on the horizon for the bride and groom if the wine really had run out! But problems can be worked through and overcome when Jesus is part of the equation as we recognised this morning. Life with Jesus will include food and people and parties and celebration but also a concern for others that encourages them to share in those activities and in that abundant life too.

.....Secondly, life with Jesus is about being in a depth of relationship with him that feels all consuming – we consume him as we pray, as we read his word, as we simply rest quietly in his presence and we are consumed by him as a result of those activities as well – he becomes the absolute focus of everything we are and do. In a moment, we will eat bread and drink wine as a mysterious way of responding to his command to eat and drink of him and to remain "in the vine." We need to keep on cultivating those ways of praying and drawing close to him and this whole image of drinking from a cup of wine is a picture of us drawing our very life from Jesus himself. Jesus turned water into wine and brought plenty of life to the celebrations at the wedding feast but in the pouring out of his own blood he brings life to you and me.

.....And lastly, life with Jesus is all about transformation. Following Jesus isn't all about laws, or rites of purification or a long list of "dos" and "don'ts." Neither is following Jesus defined by our attendance at church or the frequency at which we attend the Home Group or the Bible Study session. All of those things are great and we'll find that we want to do them anyway to help us as we follow Jesus. But, life with Jesus is all about God being in us and with us, changing us, bringing transformation into our heart and into our world, just as he transformed that water into wine. Sometimes the transformation can take a long time; sometimes it can be

really swift. Sometimes the healing that we long for or the change that we desire can actually involve quite a lot of work and trust on our part. But whichever of those may be true for us, one thing we can be sure of is that as we respond to the spirit of God at work in us, as we drink the wine that is symbolic of the new life that Jesus offers, we will be changed, not because of what we do, but because of what God does in us.

.....In this account of the miracle of water being turned into wine, the host was shocked at the quality of the wine being served at this stage in the celebrations. "Everyone else serves the best wine first, and after the guests have had plenty to drink, he serves the ordinary wine. But you have kept the best wine until now!" Sometimes this phrase is quoted as "you have saved the best till last" and you may have heard sermons based on that translation. But, the literal translation does say "he saves the best for now!" He saves the best for this present moment. He holds nothing back for later. We are the ones who hold back and offer our lame excuses for not coming to his party of the present.

.....With about 180 gallons of wine at their disposal, you can be sure that the guests at this particular wedding feast went home knowing they had been to a party. They had feasted on food and wine but they had also feasted on the presence of Jesus and that's exactly what we are invited to do as we gather around the Lord's Table in just a little while. As we drink this wine and eat this bread, let's invite Jesus to perform a miracle of transformation in us. Let us invite Jesus into those parts of our lives where the wine has run out and where we need new wine to flow. Let us place our trust in our miracle working God and receive the best that he has for us now.