

Before we look at our gospel reading this morning, let's remind ourselves why John wrote his gospel. John's aim was to show his readers who Jesus was, to persuade them to believe in Him, and to teach them that through this belief they could gain eternal life. In the book he only included eight miracles, so each one of those miracles had to really earn its place in the book, giving a really strong message to his readers.

The story of the wedding at Cana is the first of these miracles, so why chose this event as one of your eight? When we consider all the people who Jesus healed from life threatening and life changing illnesses, when we consider the demons that Jesus cast out from clearly troubled people, when we consider feeding huge numbers of hungry people with little food, why did Jesus start his earthly ministry with something that really just looks like helping someone out who had underestimated the wine required for a party? Surely, that seems all too trivial. So let's take a closer look.

Cana was a small village quite near to Nazareth; there were probably somewhere between 60 to 80 people living there. A wedding was a really notable occasion and the whole village and probably the very close villages would be involved. The couple would have been betrothed for a year before the wedding ceremony, and during that year it was the job of the groom to make sure he was ready to provide for his new wife – that would have included almost certainly building a house, quite often attached to his parents house, and ensuring everything necessary was available for the wedding ceremony. The wedding festivities themselves lasted far more than just one day. The wedding ceremony took place late in the evening after a feast, and after the ceremony the young couple were conducted to their new home. By that time it was dark and they were conducted through the village streets by the light of flaming torches and with a canopy over their heads. They were taken on a meandering route through the village so that as many people as possible would have the opportunity to wish them well. The newly married couple did not go away for their honeymoon; they stayed at home and for a week they kept open house. They wore crowns and dressed in their bridal robes. They were treated like a king and queen and their word was law. In a life where there was much poverty and constant hard work, this week of festivity and joy was one of the supreme occasions.

And to this wedding feast Mary had gone. She had something to do with the arrangements as it was she who was worried when the wine ran out, and she had enough authority to order the servants to do whatever Jesus told them to do. In this early story of Jesus there is no mention of Joseph: the most likely explanation is that by this time Joseph had died. It would seem that Joseph died quite soon after the birth of the children, and the reason why Jesus spent 18 long years in Nazareth was to take upon himself the support of his mother and his family; it was only when his younger brothers and sisters were able to look after themselves and their mother that he was able to leave home. But Mary, when she needed help, clearly turned to her eldest son, Jesus.

It was in a happy time like this wedding that Jesus gladly shared. But something went wrong. The wine ran out. For a Jewish feast wine was essential. "Without wine", said the Rabbis, "there is no joy." It was not that people were drunken but in the East wine was an essential. Drunkenness was in fact a great disgrace and they actually drank their wine in a mixture composed of two parts of wine and three parts of water. At any time the failure of provisions would have been a problem for hospitality in the East is a sacred duty; but for the provisions to fail at a wedding would be a terrible humiliation for the bridegroom as he was failing in his duties to provide for his new wife.

We then get this seemingly rather awkward, as it is translated for us here, conversation between mother and son. "They have no wine" – says the worried mother Mary. And Jesus replied, "Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come."

The first thing to say is don't get too concerned about Jesus addressing his mother as, "Woman". It might seem like a very disrespectful, rather cross sounding address, but it is actually anything but, and it really comes down to a translation issue. The same word in the original language, *gynai*, was used by Jesus on the cross to address Mary as he left her to the care of John, it is the word used by Augustus the famous Roman Emperor when he addressed Cleopatra – it is a title of respect which simply has no comparable word in English, so don't worry about that.

But then we get the question, "What concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."

When Jesus refers to his hour, then he is generally referring to his death, but I think there is rather more going on here than it first appears. Remember, Jesus has been the carpenter of Nazareth up until this point, but at the same time he has been preparing himself for what is to come. One thing he is aware of is that once his ministry starts, there is no stopping it – this is very much something that when the lid comes off, it stays off. So perhaps this is the moment that actually, despite what he says, Jesus realises that this is the moment, it all starts now.

And what of Mary? What is she thinking? After all, this ministry of Jesus' is hardly going to come as a surprise to her is it. She has always known that there is something very special about her son – there was the angel, she was a virgin, there were those strange people worshipping her son, there was the whole way he grew up learning about God – in the temple when he was twelve for example. She knew there would come a time when it all kicked off – and she realises that it is now. "Do whatever he tells you."

But still, why this miracle first? Why is this one of John's 8? Let's carry on digging into the story.

What exactly happened. Jesus told the servants to fill these 6 jars used for purification, with water. The water in these jars would be used for two things – they would be used for washing the feet of visitors (sandals in those days were just strapped to the bottom of the feet and so when visitors arrived having walked on the dusty roads, their feet would be filthy and it was the custom of the host to welcome their guests by the washing of their feet – generally the job of a servant but making sure it happened was the responsibility of the host. Second, the Jews were very, religious, about washing hands before a meal and between courses – it was one of their religious rites which they must follow. So the water that Jesus is using to save the groom's embarrassment is special before he even uses it.

Then the miracle takes place and the water has now become wine. Can you imagine tasting wine made by Jesus? It's not going to be just any wine, it's not even going to be your favourite wine, it is going to be the most amazing wine you, or anyone, has ever tasted. Forget your Châteaufort 2011 – this is amazing stuff.

Now, I wonder what actually happens next. I think it is pretty likely that these servants who take the wine to the steward may well have had a little taste on the way. These guys didn't know who Jesus was. They are being asked to give a glass of water to their boss when he is panicking that they have run out of wine. Of course they will try it, but it is the steward, who we know discovers the truth about it. And who is this steward? In most weddings these days if there is a disaster like this one you like to hope that the best man will sort it out – one of the guests. But here, the steward is a servant. And that is key to all this.

So, having finished digging into the story, what we have discovered? Can we answer our, "why this miracle?" question? I think so.

First, this miracle was for a relatively small number of people – no, actually just for one person. The bridegroom sees his new marriage falling apart in its earliest of days, and so Jesus, performs a miracle for

him. And what is more, whilst the guests may hear about the story at some point, and may love the wine, he doesn't broadcast what he has done widely, he just does it. Isn't that just typical of how Jesus worked – 1 to 1 – and how he stills works?

Second, the first people to witness the miracle were servants. There was no big press launch as Jesus performed his first miracle. There was no celebrity crowd watching as he started his ministry. The only people who really knew what happened were a small number of servants. Does that not remind you of the first people to visit the baby Jesus in the stable?

Third, out of an act of purification comes the best thing anyone has ever experienced. Is this not Jesus saying right at the beginning of his ministry, that if you get things right, when it comes to following his father God, then something better than you could ever imagine, will come your way.

Fourth, because of this miracle, the groom has probably just thrown the best party ever. He has about 150 gallons, about 900 bottles of the best wine ever. Yes, the numbers are not to be taken literally, but I think this miracle can easily be renamed the miracle of perpetual joy, and, Jesus is the provider of that everlasting joy. However good we feel at the moment in question, the truth is that the joy from anything we achieve is temporary: this joy is everlasting. So, don't settle for that. Jesus is saying with this miracle, "Let me show you what I am capable of."

I'm sure you are aware that many people think Christianity is joyless, it is boring. They have the idea that God has just come up with a whole list of things that you shouldn't do, and they are all the fun things in life, and that is Christianity. Nothing can be further from the truth. Jesus doesn't want you to give up joy – he just wants you to replace that cheap wine with the best wine imaginable.

Let's remind ourselves of what the bible tells us will happen at the end of the age? In the book of Revelation there is a party – it is a wedding party with a groom and a bride. The groom is Jesus and we, the church, are the bride. And, as in Cana, it is the job of the groom to provide for the bride. It is Jesus' job to provide for us – so we must make sure we listen to him. In this party in Revelation the food never runs out, the wine never runs out, the joy never runs out.

But for this party to happen Jesus had to die on the cross. In order for us to experience true joy Jesus had to die on a cross, for us. And it was at Cana, at that wedding, that Jesus' journey that would take him to the cross, began.

You cannot get to eternal life without the groom, Jesus, providing for us – but he is a really good provider.

What was Mary's response in Cana to Jesus saying his time had not yet come? Do whatever he asks you. Is that how we will respond to him today?

Amen