

### Part 1: Jesus tempted

We have looked at the birth of Jesus, the preparations of John the Baptist, the calling of the first disciples, and now this week we are looking at Jesus, in effect, starting work, with his first miracle.

But before that, by at least partly looking at another story which if we are not careful we will miss, let's spend a little time thinking about who Jesus actually was, what he was like, and, well, how he was going to live his life.

And to do that we delve back into Luke's gospel. It is Luke that gives us by far the most expansive description of the beginning of Jesus' life up until – well, where we get to later in this service.

Towards the end of the third chapter of Luke we get two fairly short sections which show us the two sides of Jesus – Jesus who was fully divine, and Jesus who was fully human.

So first we have the Baptism of Jesus:

“When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” “

These two verses not only give us a clear indication that Jesus was the Son of God, but it also shows us something else really important. Jesus had clearly been aware of his status for a long time as we are told, “And as he was praying . . .” Some people have suggested that this was the moment that Jesus realised he was there to serve God, but he was already used to praying and so was therefore in a close relationship with God. It was just a question of timing. Jesus the divine, the Son of God. And this side of Jesus was built on by the story of the 12 year old Jesus at the temple –

“Did you not know I would be in my Father's house?”

That was Jesus' comments to his distraught parents then they eventually found the lost child, and remember those priests in the temple he was talking to who were so surprised by his questions.

And the second section shows us the other side of Jesus, as it traces the genealogy of Jesus, through a human route, all the way back to Adam, who Luke describes as, ‘son of God’. And don't worry about the fact that the genealogy in Luke's gospel is different to the genealogy in Matthew's gospel. As I was saying last week, these gospels are not historical tracts; they are books written to convince people that Jesus was the Messiah, and that he should be followed as such. And families in those days in that very small country of Israel were really quite close – cousins marrying, widows marrying their late husband's brother – all very strange to us, but what that all means is that two people going back through a family tree could very easily get to the same point in that tree by two different routes. What Luke is showing us is his genealogy of Jesus the human, the Son of God.

And then newly baptised, recognised by the prophesying John the Baptist, full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus starts work by going off on retreat – into the wilderness. And here he meets his first opposition, in the form of the tempter.

“If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

Surely not an unreasonable question – would God want his Son to starve? Or perhaps the tempter's question was more like this.

“If you want people to follow you, use your wonderful powers to give them material things.”

But Jesus saw through this one straight away. The Tempter was suggesting that Jesus should bribe people into following him. Jesus' response?

"People will never find life in material things."

So the tempter tried again

"I will give you the glory of these kingdoms and authority over them, because they are mine to give to anyone I please. I will give it all to you if you will worship me."

Or to put it another way

"Worship me, and all will be yours."

You can see the plan can't you. This is the temptation to compromise. All you have to do is . . . , but Jesus was having none of it.

"You must worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

No compromises for Jesus. The tempter tries one last time, taking Jesus to Jerusalem, to the highest point of the temple.

"If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, 'He will order his angels to protect and guard you. And they will hold you up with their hands so you won't even hurt your foot on a stone.'"

This was the temptation to introduce sensational events to attract people – but again, not for Jesus.

"The Scriptures also say, 'You must not test the Lord your God.'"

Or as William Barclay translated this response from Jesus

"No, you must not make senseless experiments with the power of God."

And all Jesus' responses were not just made up by him – they came from the book of Deuteronomy, from the scriptures that the Jewish people would have known, and lived by.

So this Jesus, who was about to start work on the mission that his father God had sent him on was a man of principle, a man who would not accept half measures, a man who would not compromise, a man who believed that there was only one truth to live your life by – that which came from his Father God.

And just to be clear, because we all glibly say that this is the case, it is Luke that tells us one other thing about Jesus at this point. He is about 30 years of age. He had spent all that time in Nazareth, waiting, probably because Joseph had died by this stage and he had to wait for his brothers and sisters to grow up before he was able to leave home. So now, his real work begins.

## Part 2 The wedding at Cana

Our gospel reading this morning came from the book of John, and John is continuing to help us with the question we have been asking today, "Who is Jesus?" John has only one purpose in mind for his gospel and that is that his readers will know, "Who is Jesus" and that by knowing that, his readers will believe in Jesus, and that by believing in him they will have eternal life. If you have met someone who has completely changed your life then you will understand this – because that is Jesus, and John talking about Jesus. This is John saying I spent three years with this man and spending those years with him

showed me the miracles that he performed, the teaching that he gave, indeed it showed me the glory of God.

And John started in chapter 1 by talking about the word becoming flesh, how Jesus the son of God who existed at the beginning of time, has now appeared in human form, he talked about the testimony of John the Baptist, and the calling of the First Disciples, and now in chapter two John starts to tell us about what Jesus did – in the form of this miracle, in this tiny little town of Cana in Galilee.

This is a story so full of parts that we can get real meaning from, and we will see just why John includes it as one of just 8 miracles that he includes in his gospel. Cana was quite near to Nazareth – so near that you can see one from the other. In Cana there was a wedding feast to which Mary went and at which it appears she held a special place. She clearly had something to do with the arrangements, as she was very worried when the wine stocks got low, and she had enough authority to order the servants to do whatever Jesus told them to do.

We sometimes assume that there were only ever four gospels written – but the reality is that only four of the books about the life of Jesus made it into the New Testament. Some of the other gospels written also have this story in them and from them we can glean various other details about the story. One of those gospels tells us that Mary was a sister of the bridegroom's mother; another tells us that the bridegroom was John, the author of the gospel, himself, and that his mother was Salome, the sister of Mary. Whether these extra details are accurate or not, what they do indicate is that this miracle at the wedding in Cana is something that really happened – it is not a story made up by John to fit in with the purpose of his gospel.

The scene is a village wedding feast. In Palestine a wedding was a really notable occasion. The festivities lasted far more than one day. The wedding ceremony itself took place late in the evening, after a feast. 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 by as long a route as possible so that as many people as possible would have the opportunity to wish them well. But a newly married couple did not go away for their honeymoon; they stayed at home; for a week they kept open house. They were treated like a king and queen, were actually addressed as 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.

It was in a happy time like this that Jesus gladly shared. But something went wrong. It is likely that the coming of Jesus caused something of a problem. He had been invited to the feast, but he had arrived not alone but with five disciples. Five extra people may well have caused complications. Five unexpected guests might provide any festival with a problem, and here the problem was the wine.

For a Jewish feast wine was essential. "Without wine", said the Rabbi, "there is no joy." It was not that people were drunk, 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 to 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 unthinkable. Running out of wine was not just inconvenient, but a social disaster and disgrace. The family would have to live with the shame of it for a long time to come; bride and groom might regard it as bringing bad luck on their married life.

And then Mary approaches Jesus.

They haven't got any wine!

OK Mum, but what's that got to do with me. My time hasn't come yet.

So this is where we start to pick up those parts of the story with real meaning for us. John only mentions Jesus' mother twice in his entire gospel. This is the first time.

My time hasn't come yet? The whole of John's gospel is focused on helping his reader's get to know Jesus, and through this knowledge, eternal life. He looks forward to the time when heaven and earth meet. And it is through the death and resurrection of Jesus that we have eternal life, the event for John which is the ultimate meeting of heaven and earth. That is the time Jesus is referring to when he says, "My time hasn't come yet." And that is the other time in John's gospel when we meet his mother.

Faced with no wine Jesus calls for these six stone water jars. These jars were used for Jewish purification rites, and their inclusion in this story is a sign that God is doing new thing from within the old Jewish system, bringing purification to Israel, and indeed the world, in a whole new way.

Then there is the miracle itself, the transformation from water to wine, and this is meant to signify the effect that Jesus can have, can still have today, on people's lives.

And one final point that John is alluding to – actually at the very start of the story, we are told that this all happened on the third day. Now where have we heard that before?

But what has that all got to do with us today? Yes, we all believe that those miracles happened, that Jesus made all sorts of things happen – not just water into wine, but feeding thousands of people with a few loaves and fish, healing people from blindness and leprosy, casting out demons, but that was two thousand years ago.

Actually miracles were not something that Jesus introduced. Our first reading this morning told us of just one of those miracles – this time through Elijah.

But still, that was all in the past. Wasn't it?

Two very different stories from 2022

A four-year-old boy was able to hear for the first time whilst attending United - a New Wine festival in August. Whilst the boy hasn't been publicly named, crowds celebrated when the news was shared from the festival stage. Rev Kate Wharton, assistant national director of New Wine, told us: "A four-year-old boy who was born deaf, and was prayed for during the week, was able to hear for the first time; his mum told this delightful story of him staying awake whispering to his brother all night."

The Deputy General Secretary of the Ukrainian Bible Society said miracles were taking place in Ukraine, despite the horror of war. In March, he said an increasing amount of people were turning to Christianity to find light in the darkness since the Russian invasion began. He said the power of God was preventing even worse devastation. This is what he said. "We are very grateful to all of you who are standing with us in prayer and solidarity. I want to tell you that with prayer we see so many miracles. I have seen personally many miracles over the last 16 days - when bombs or rockets have fallen but not exploded and lots of lives have been saved because of that. Russian tanks have been left because they were empty of fuel and soldiers have run off. In Odesa, in the Black Sea, there has been a storm for four days and ships couldn't come closer to the city to shoot rockets. So prayers are already bringing results and miracles are saving a lot of lives."

Two examples which surely would have made a new version of the bible, if one was being written today. The simple point is that miracles do still happen today. But I ask you this – and I address this to myself as much as to you. When we pray for something that seems like it really needs a miracle, whilst we all hope for a miracle, do we really expect a miracle? The point is, we should.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says, "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people." James in his letter says, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective." And again Paul, this time in his first letter to the Thessalonians simply says, "pray continually." If we want something to happen, if we want God to intervene, all we can do is to pray.

When I was thinking about how to finish this talk a simple phrase came to me. When things are going badly, and people don't see how they are going to get out of what feels like a desperate situation, you quite often here them say, "All we can do is pray for a miracle" and immediately I thought, "Do we, as a church, do that?" Do we as a church pray that something that seems to be beyond our control can be rectified?

Now, I have every confidence that many of us pray, often by ourselves, but perhaps with one or two other people, for an individual who is really struggling – or perhaps for someone who is simply under the weather. But do you ever wonder how much more powerful those prayers could be if we all prayed them?

Having said that, I am also very much a realist, and I know that in churches up and down the country, the meetings that are the most poorly attended are often prayer meetings. That can be because if we hold them during the day we exclude all those who are still working, and if we hold them during an evening, especially on dark winter nights, many people are simply not happy coming out at night. So perhaps we need to find another way to pray together as a church.

And what I am asking you to do this morning is, when you go home, think about whether if we could find a way whereby we all pray for the same things as, at least part of our prayers, would you be willing to join in with that? And I'd also like to ask you to consider how perhaps you might think that could happen in a way that you be happy to be involved. And thirdly, I'd like you to think, and pray about, whether perhaps God is saying to you, "You could be part of a team to organise this." The churchwardens and I, and various other people in our churches don't have the capacity to take on extra responsibilities like this, but surely increasing and improving the prayer life of our church as a whole, is vital to our future. So I am praying that a number of you will come forward and say – yes, I could help organise that. So those three questions.

Would you be willing to be part of a praying church?

Can you think of a way this could be done which would mean you could be part of that praying church?

Would you be willing to help organise it. And if your answer to this third question is yes, then perhaps later in the week, when you're sure, drop me a line and let me know. And we'll take it from there, and hopefully come up with an answer to that second questions.

We should be praying together, and sometimes those prayers will be for miracles, and that is right because, miracles do happen. Amen