

20th January 2019 – Signs of what?

Readings: Isaiah 62:1-5 & John 2:1-11

Intro

Good morning everyone. We are still in the season of Epiphany and today we are going to be looking at the story of the wedding at Cana. From earliest times the Church has linked together the accounts of the Nativity, Jesus' birth, Epiphany and the coming of the wise men, Jesus' baptism and the wedding at Cana, today's NT passage. Why – because they all tell us something about who Jesus is and what he came to do, and at the beginning of our Church year it is good to remind ourselves of some of these basic truths of our faith.

So this morning I want to look briefly at the events in today's reading and try to tease out some of the deeper truths embedded within it, and then look at how we might apply this to our own situation and what Jesus is calling us to today. Along the way we will also look at our OT reading from Isaiah to see how that can help us understand something of the significance of John's account of the wedding in Cana.

Signs

However, our theme for today is 'Signs of what? So I thought we would begin by looking at what John meant by the word 'sign' – after all, he describes the wedding at Cana as the first of the signs that Jesus did. In the other Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke use the Greek word *dynameis* to describe Jesus' miracles – they are works of power showing that the Kingdom of God is at hand - but John uses the word 'sign' (*semeion/semeia*). In classical Greek 'sign' referred to the design on a signet ring or shield that identified the owner, so by using this word John is drawing our attention to the person of Jesus and the way in which God is working through him to bring salvation to the world.

John writes: "What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him." Jn 2:11.

This is indeed the purpose of John's gospel:

"Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." Jn 20:30-31.

In other words, John wants us to see beyond the event; to see the sign not merely as a story to promote Jesus' miraculous powers which in some way prove that he is who he claims to be, but as a story that invites us to ask penetrating questions about who this person is; what does it tell us about how God is at work in Jesus; how does it reveal his glory, and when we glimpse that glory will it stimulate our faith in such a way that it affects how we live our lives?

Before we do this perhaps we need to look at what John meant by glory when he says that as one of Jesus' followers he saw his glory, "the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (1:14).

In the OT God could not be seen, but his radiance, like that of fire or light could be encountered. Jesus, the Word made flesh reveals his glory as he reveals the

Father, and he reveals him through what he does, particularly through the signs - and supremely through his death on the cross. So perhaps we could rephrase the question by asking how does the way in which Jesus lives and the things he does reveal what God is like and how will this affect the way we live our lives.

John 2:1-11 The wedding in Cana

So, let's remind ourselves of the account of the wedding in Cana which Merle read to us. Remember this is at the beginning of John's Gospel when he is introducing Jesus to his readers. This part of the Gospel is sometimes called the Book of Signs because John gives us a series of stories that are signs telling us about Jesus and revealing his glory.

John tell us that what Jesus did at Cana was the first of the signs, or rather the beginning of the signs – the word John uses is *arche*, as in John 1:1 – “In the beginning was the Word ...”. In other words this is not just the first in a series but is the one that is the foundation for all that is to follow.

Cana was only a few miles from Nazareth where Jesus had grown up and the fact that Mary is present and that Jesus and his disciples are invited guests suggests that the wedding might involve family or at least close friends. Cana was only a small village so a wedding would have been a major social event with extended family and friends all joining in. The celebrations could go on for as long as a week and the bridegroom was expected to provide all the food and drink for the guests during that time.

All seemed to be going well and then, everyone's nightmare scenario – they run out of wine! I don't know if you are like me but I know that when I am responsible for providing food for a group of people I always over cater – we provide enough to feed an army, don't we. Well, whatever provision the bridegroom had made it wasn't enough – imagine the embarrassment, the shame – there could even be the threat of a law suit from the bride's family who would see it as an insult to their daughter.

So Mary turns to Jesus:

“They have no more wine.”

I'm not sure what she expected him to do but as the eldest son, the man of the house, she would have relied on him to sort things out.

His reply is not what we might expect. He doesn't say: “ That's OK Mum leave it with me. No worries.”

Instead he distances himself addressing her as 'woman,' -not a mark of disrespect but certainly more formal, (See also 19:26)] and he asks: “How can this matter that you are worried about be of any concern to me?”

It's puzzling but I think what Jesus is doing here is putting a necessary distance between himself and his mother. From now on his focus will have to be to do his Father's will. and he cannot be distracted by family concerns. It's a hard but necessary lesson for Mary to learn.

Nevertheless, after Mary has told the servants to do whatever he tells them, Jesus does get involved and gives instructions for them to fill to the brim the six stone jars

that were used to hold water for the Jewish purification rites. They are then to draw off some water and take it to the master of the feast - who is amazed at the fine quality of the wine he is given to drink!

And it's not only the quality of the wine that John draws our attention to but also the quantity. If all the water in the jars was turned to wine that would be about 100-150 gallons or 500-750 litres. At this point many of the people at the wedding as well as John's readers would have exchanged questioning looks. They knew that in the OT a superabundance of wine or oil or grain was a sign that God was restoring the fortunes of his people Israel and that the messianic age had finally arrived.

They would have known Amos 9:13-14:

"The days are coming, declares the Lord, when the reaper will be overtaken by the ploughman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from the hills, and I will bring my people Israel back from exile."

Can you imagine the excitement this would have generated in a people that were fed up with Roman rule and were always on the lookout for a possible Messiah.

As we try to dig a little deeper into the significance of this sign we will need to turn to our OT reading Isaiah 62:1-5 to appreciate what John and his readers would have heard in this story. John's Gospel is rooted in the OT Scriptures; consciously or unconsciously John is drawing on concepts and themes that have a long history in Jewish thought. Even the setting – a wedding – would have evoked the marriage and bridegroom imagery that typified God's covenant relationship with his people.

Isaiah 62:1-5

So, what light does Isaiah 62:1-5, throw on our understanding of John 2 and also on the circumstances we find ourselves in today?

First of all, this part of Isaiah is addressed to Jews who were still reeling from the shock of defeat and exile. They had lived in a little bubble of false expectations thinking that their God would protect them no matter what. Not so. Their land had been overrun and was now lying waste; Jerusalem had been destroyed, and the temple – the symbol of God's presence with his people - was in ruins. The people themselves were under foreign rule. No wonder they felt abandoned and bereft.

The situation was not quite so bad in Jesus' time for they had returned to the land and rebuilt the temple but they were still not a free people. They were still waiting for a messiah figure to come and rescue them.

And what about ourselves? Some of us as individuals have been through the pain of feeling abandoned and forsaken, as did Jesus on the cross: "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" is a cry from the heart. What about our brothers and sisters in the persecuted church? Did you know that more Christians are being persecuted for their faith now than at any time in history? And on a lesser scale we feel the disappointment of being a church in decline – our Sunday Schools and our pews are not as full as they once were. People are not only walking away from the Church they are actively campaigning against Christianity. What is going on – has God abandoned us?

But these verses in Isaiah are full of God's assurances and promises. He has not forgotten about them, he will not give up, and he will act on their behalf. They will be vindicated in front of everyone when they return to the land. What God does for his people will be visible for all to see like a blazing torch, and they will be like a jewel in the crown when their fortunes are restored.

Isaiah assures the Jews that God will act. They will be given a new name. God's people will no longer be called Forsaken or Abandoned (zuvah) but Hephzibah - my delight is in her; and the land will no longer be called Desolate but Beulah – married – in other words, protected and cared for. 'The Lord will take delight in you.' He will rejoice over you with singing as it says in Zephaniah 3:17.

This beautiful imagery of God's relationship with his people may well have been in John's mind as he writes about this first sign. God's covenant love is the basis of everything - for ourselves, as people of the new covenant, as it was for the Jews.

Significance of the sign

Let's think for a minute about why John chose the turning of water into wine at a wedding feast as the first sign.

"They have no more wine." That is the crux of the problem. What they had was insufficient to satisfy people's thirst. Looking deeper, we can see this as a description of Jewish practices, typified by the water for ceremonial washing, which were partial and imperfect. Something more was needed: the water of purification needed to be transformed into the new wine of the gospel. John presents Jesus as the one through whom this is possible, and in the rest of the Book of Signs we see Jesus as the one who is the fulfilment of the Jewish feasts and other institutions.

We can also apply aspects of this story to our lives today. Just as the old purification jars and ceremonial washings were replaced with new wine, so some of our religious rituals and customs that have been treasured through generations may have to be rethought – the Church is always in the business of reforming itself. As we look to what may lie ahead for us with a new vicar and a new bishop let's try to be open to any changes that might bring.

Also, as we read through the story of the wedding we see that it is Jesus who becomes the one who supplies the wine. In other words, he takes on the role of the bridegroom. In the OT God describes himself as the husband of his people, and in the NT Jesus is the bridegroom and the church is his bride(Rev 21:9).

Remember the new name they were given? Hephzibah - my delight is in her. I wonder how we see ourselves as God's people - too often we beat ourselves up, seeing the worst in ourselves and others?

[Say it aloud – left side to right side and vv "The Lord takes delight in you. "]

As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride so will your God rejoice over you.” Maybe you can think back to your own wedding day or remember the joy of a young couple you know – maybe even Harry and Megan!

I’m sure there was a lot of rejoicing at the wedding in Cana and we are all invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb. Are we a rejoicing people? Do we really believe that the Lord delights in us?

Then again, one of the interesting things about Jesus turning water into wine is what it tells us about the way God is at work in the world through Jesus. In particular, the way in which the material creation is involved and gets transformed - water becomes wine. John says the event took place on the third day and that makes it the 8th day since he started his account (1:19). Some people see this as symbolic of the first day of a new creation week; the new creation is coming into being. One commentator says: “As the gospel unfolds, it will become clear that the new creation, symbolised by Jesus’ provision of abundant wine, will be the outcome of his death and resurrection.” In Revelation 3 Jesus is described as the arche or beginning of the new creation which culminates in the new heavens and new earth of Revelation 21-22.

As John Painter explains: “In the signs, the loving kindness of the faithful God is present as a token, or first fruits, of God’s purpose to make creation whole.” Jesus coming is not just significant for us humans but for the whole of creation. And we are called to follow Jesus example in striving to make creation whole - a task more urgent than ever in these days of global warming and habitat destruction.

Even the fact that Jesus stepped in when there was a problem at a friend’s wedding should alert us to the fact that Christianity is not just in the business of saving souls but also interested in the ordinary events of our lives and our everyday dilemmas.

Conclusion

We started out by asking the question: Signs of what?

Perhaps we can summarise our answer by saying that when Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana, it was an indication or sign that the long awaited kingdom of God had arrived. God himself was present with his people in the person of Jesus, revealing what the glory of God looks like in human form, and challenging his disciples to follow him and put their faith in him.

What about us: what should our response be?

Perhaps we can sum that up in Mary’s words: “Do whatever he tells you.”

Let’s pause and listen to what God might be saying to us today and what he wants us to do about it.