Sermon for 2nd in Ordinary Time Year C

Readings: Isaiah 62: 1-5; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

We love a good wedding today as much as we ever did. It’s marriage that we hold in less high regard and that’s a pity. It’s a great shame because we help sow the seed of cynicism about marriage and buy in to the modern view that life-long marital fulfilment is either an impossible dream, or so imprisoning that it should not be an aspiration at all. The fact that marriages don’t always work out is not an excuse for abandoning the aspiration altogether.

In the Bible, marriage and weddings serve as positive symbols of abiding love, deep fulfilment and absolute commitment. The wedding feast at Cana recalls Adam and Eve in the Garden together. Where once Adam and Eve left the Garden in disgrace, shamed by their sin into perceiving their nakedness, now marriage celebrates joyful union free from sin or shame.

John has intentionally crafted his opening prologue: “In the beginning was the Word…” to bring to mind the creation story in Genesis. Now, instead of the story of how the couple were corrupted by sin and expelled from their paradisical happiness, we have a story of a wedding redeemed from failure and shame by the presence and action of Jesus. The sign, which John believes the wedding at Cana to constitute, is clear - Jesus redeems what was doomed to failure and shame by the gift of wine, symbolic for the gift of his blood. For John, it is not just about a particular couple in Cana and their wedding day, but a sign for the healing of humanity as a whole.

John intends us to see the symbolism of the 6 stone jars. The water jars represent the Jewish ritual washing and there are 6 of them to indicate that the Jewish ritual is less than perfect which would be represented by the number 7. When the servants dip in another vessel to take it to the steward of the wedding feast – now miraculously filled with the symbolic wine, they are thereby also creating the 7th jar – symbolising the perfecting of salvation brought by Christ’s blood.

The vast amount of the wine now filling the six, large 100 litre jars, symbolises the superabundance of grace that is to be found in Christ. There is salvation in Christ not just for the Jews but for the whole world. The account of twelve baskets of crumbs after the feeding of the 5,000 makes the same point.

The symbolism doesn’t stop there either. Not only is there a reference to Jesus’ saving blood, the story also points towards the resurrection, and the Eucharistic life of the Church, and finally to the consummation of all things in heaven.

Firstly, this miracle takes place on the third day. John does not add that detail without careful consideration. It points towards the third day of the resurrection. It is that third day that makes possible the restoration of a broken relationship between humankind and God. The symbolic wedding day longed for in Isaiah 62 has now dawned at Cana in Galilee.

Secondly, the wedding feast symbolises the Eucharist which was to come. The Church doesn’t always feel as joyful as a wedding party! Yet at the heart of our liturgical life is a symbol of feasting, as much as it is symbol of death upon the cross.

John writes his account of this first sign fully aware of the Eucharistic life of the Church. We are challenged by this story to be a party people. We have GOOD News to share with the world. We have COMFORT to bring to the people. We have PROMISE of restoration, forgiveness and the ultimate putting right of all that has been wrong. To place the Eucharist at the centre of the Church’s life is not just to remind us of the cost of our salvation, but also to call us to joyful celebration of God’s amazing gift in Christ.

Thirdly, the Book of Revelation uses the symbolism of the wedding to speak of ultimate things. The final consummation of all things shall see the New Jerusalem, the new people of God, come down from heaven like a bride prepared for her husband.

Jesus speaks of himself as the groom: In Matthew 9.15 Jesus defends his disciples for not fasting like the disciples of John the Baptist because he says it is right they celebrate whilst the bridegroom is with them. In John 3.29 John the Baptist refers to himself as the “bridegroom’s friend.” And in Matthew 25, Jesus uses the symbolism of the wedding feast and the bridal party who are unprepared through their lack oil for their lamps as a symbol for living in readiness for the heavenly banquet.

The miracle at Cana in Galilee can only happen because Jesus and his disciples had been invited. This is an obvious remark to make, but worth a moment’s reflection.

It appears in John’s account that this wedding took place in the early part of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. We can’t even be sure, if we follow John’s Gospel, whether Jesus had even recruited all twelve disciples. John tells us in the previous chapter about Jesus calling the Galilean fishermen, and then Nathanael and Philip. John just doesn’t tell us about the rest of the disciples. Yet he seems to believe this wedding took place on the third day.

John’s Gospel is said to be notoriously bad for dependable chronology, grouping his stories of Jesus more thematically, than chronologically. But if we accept the accounts of the other Gospels, Jesus was immediately embroiled in controversy. He cured a man in the synagogue at Capernaum, he was then besieged with crowds at Simon Peter’s house and then disappeared early the next morning leaving the expectant throng not doubt bemused and disappointed that he had already left (Mark 1:35-39).

So the invitation to Jesus and his disciples to the wedding in Cana must have been issued in the light of Jesus’ fame and healing miracles at Capernaum at the very least, otherwise there would have been no disciples at all with him.

Whether Jesus’ return to Capernaum mentioned in John 2:12 after the wedding is the same return to Capernaum we read about in Mark 2:1 after a short tour of Galilee is unknown. That visit to Capernaum, in Mark 2, introduces the first real opposition to Jesus’ ministry when he forgives the sins of the paralysed man who has been lowered through the roof.

So whether Jesus received this invitation after he had become a figure of controversy and scandal or not, we may presume that he came at least as a reputed miracle worker.

Jesus’ immediate response to his mother’s implied request is clearly not interpreted as a refusal to help, since he immediately proceeded to solve the problem. His words to Mary are better interpreted as way of distancing himself from her maternal control. Yes, he will help, but on his own terms. It is not yet his time, tells us that there is a time and plan to Jesus’ ministry which he alone will control. His “time” will come when he is nailed to the cross.

(See Sermon for 1st of Christmas Year C for more on the relationship between Mary and Jesus).

I am not suggesting that the bridegroom’s family invited Jesus along as a miracle worker just in case they ran out of wine! What I am suggesting is that to make such an invitation on such an important day was to go out on a limb, was to nail one’s colours to the mast, and was to defy any opinion that had already turned against Jesus.

Just to be a teacher who was recruiting his own disciples made Jesus a controversial figure. Reports of his healings would have earned him repute, but also caused some fear. Those left disappointed outside Peter’s house might have been resentful – all of this is likely even before Jesus proclaimed the forgiveness of sins, or was thrown out of the synagogue at Nazareth.

As I write this sermon, Jeremy Clarkson has just been sacked from *Top Gear*: It would be a statement to invite Jeremy Clarkson onto your show or to your house right now, it would not just be a routine invitation.

It was no routine invitation to Jesus either. He already came with a reputation.

That’s a problem still for many today. If Jesus hadn’t already been discovered, if Jesus had just been unearthed from old manuscripts, many would gladly follow him.

But Jesus comes with a reputation. He’s a controversial figure. Other people, strangers as well as family and friends, will have an attitude about whether you invite Jesus or not. Nothing about Jesus can just be a routine, private matter. To invite Jesus means you become publicly aligned with him and all his followers and all the historical baggage of the Church. Does that put you off?

Whoever this young couple were in Cana, they invited Jesus and his disciples despite the first ripples of controversy surrounding him. Those first ripples are today a tidal wave of opinions, both embracing and hostile. It takes even greater courage today than it did then in Cana to invite Jesus in, but without that invitation there is no miracle.

Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard - March 2015