

**At a wedding**

*Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11*

I told this story at a Presbytery service a few weeks ago. Please still lead the laughter if you've heard it before!

A husband and wife were having a 'domestic'. The wife wanted to know how much her husband loved her. "Would you still love me if my hair turned grey?" she asked. "Yes, of course", he replied. "Would you love me if I put on a little weight?" "Yes of course", was his loving response. The wife's next question was a little more cunning: "Would you still love me if you won the lottery?" The husband paused for a moment and then replied, "Yes, I'd still love you if I won the lottery. But I'd miss you."

When you start putting a price on love; when you start attempting to put a value on how much someone's love means – you're heading for trouble. Love isn't a thing to be measured carefully. Love is something to be spread extravagantly.

Extravagantly, like the unexpected story of Jesus at the Wedding at Cana, where, according to John's Gospel, the first sign of Jesus being the extraordinary Son of God, Lamb of God, was performed. You would have thought that Jesus, having just begun His ministry and to select His disciples, might have gone for something deeply spiritual – a prayer retreat, a desert experience, a study of the Bible. But no. He takes them to a wedding. It is there that they began their journey of faith. In those days, wedding feasts lasted about a week. In the language Jesus spoke, Aramaic, the word for 'wedding feast' is similar to the word for 'drink.'<sup>i</sup> I can imagine anyone here who has been the father of a bride will know precisely what that means.

Weddings are often accidents waiting to happen. Something nearly always goes wrong at some point in the planning, or on the day. Something was going wrong at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. In the midst of the feast the wine ran out before the week-long feast was over.

We read that it was, "On the third day." Remind you of anything? At the wedding it was Jesus' mother who noticed first. Never referred to by her name, Mary, in John's gospel (and there's a sermon in itself along with all the other unnamed women), she steps in. "They have no wine."

Now, this story of a wedding is so much more than a simple tale about a super-miracle revealing Jesus' power. John is challenging us to think about a deeper, more symbolic meaning. A joyous wedding – faith is meant to celebrate new life, and that's what Jesus comes to bring. A rebirth of possibilities. The old empty stone jars stand for the emptiness of the old religion which will run out, whereas Jesus comes to bring new wine that will never run out. The thirsty wedding guests are those then, and now, who so desperately need to hear good news, and hope, and love. Jesus will provide not water, but wine, so that the party of faith may continue. Jesus brings new vitality to old religion, and for those who will gather with Jesus, and be with Jesus, and party with Jesus, there will be plenty of it, this new wine, this new hope, this new life.

What a way for Jesus to begin His public ministry in John's gospel! What a thing for us to realise that if we use our imagination, and free ourselves only from a literal understanding of a story, we find these deeper, richer meanings. Here is a story, set at a wedding, which is only *one* of the forms of relationship that God gives, here is a story about abundance, and generosity, and the transformation of everyday water into celebratory wine. Don't let an attempt to understand the miracle literally undermine an imaginative understanding of the depth of what is being revealed at Cana. If we see our religion, or our living, or our relationships as dreary, we are bound to have difficulty in imagining Jesus changing dreariness into celebration, and hope and joy. Aren't we all like the thirsty guests, longing to experience this miracle of transformation?

In our relationships, whether it is with the people around us at home, or at work, or in the Church, or in the community, or in the country, or in the world, are we not, like the Old Testament reading from Isaiah, longing, "no more to be termed Forsaken...(or) Desolate"? But rather to be in a good, healthy, adapting, reciprocal relationship that brings pleasure to us, pleasure to others, and pleasure to God.

Jesus starts His ministry in the Gospel of John in the place where a relationship is being celebrated. How are your relationships today? Open, honest, healthy, fun, supportive, caring, functioning? Or has the dreariness settled, or the frost chilled, or the light gone out, or the silence fallen?

When I meet with couples, either about to get married, or in some form of established relationship which could be a personal one, or a work one, or a faith one, I get them to consider this: Think about the three things that you absolutely love and adore about your beloved; and *tell* them about it. Then think about the one thing that you really don't like about them, and work out how you, together, will change it within the year. Three things you like, one thing you don't like. Go! It could be make or break time. I love being single.

But hang on. I have other relationships, with colleagues, with my work, with my friends, with you. Three things I really love about you. And one thing that, within the year, we're going to change. Let me get back to you on that...

Jesus starts His ministry in John's Gospel at a wedding, at one of the places where human relationship is pre-eminent. Jesus starts His ministry in a place that reminds us that we need to be loved.

"This deepest yearning within each one of us, deeper even than our need to appear strong and powerful, or to have a spiritual consciousness of self, a feeling of the infinite within us. (The Greek philosopher) Aristotle says that when people do not feel loved, they seek to be admired...Our thirst for love, to be 'belovèd', can be easily diverted and become perverse through a world of fantasies and images. We are all more or less broken and wounded in our affections and in our capacity to relate."<sup>ii</sup>

Of course, many people do find true, rewarding love, but others are frustrated in love. Marriages can end in divorce; not everyone finds the right partner; some make the wrong choices and feel they have to 'stick with it'; some never find the fulfilment they desire because they are afraid of commitment, and of true, hard, searching, healing relationships. Some have an unhealthy relationship with pornography, or alcohol, or drugs, or work, or being needed by everybody but actually feeling important to nobody. Some are caught up in a terrible loneliness, a feeling of not being loveable.

Jesus begins His ministry at a wedding feast is a reminder of hope. Not that everyone will get married or find the one relationship that will make their lives. But Jesus is leading us all to a wonderful celebration of love. Not a hoax, not an awakening of the unattainable.

But a place of love where single, married, divorced, straight, gay, young, old, male, female, healthy, suffering from ill-health, rich, poor, extraordinarily talented, simply run-of-the-mill, full of faith, full of doubt – whatever we are – we may know, find, experience, rejoice in the fact that in some way, in a relationship, in our work, in our faith, WE ARE LOVED!

At a wedding, where there is song, laughter and wine, we are reminded of the importance of meals and celebrations in life. Jesus is there, providing more of everything.

WE ARE LOVED!

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Jean Vanier, Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John, p51

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid p59