

Wedding at Cana John 2:1-11 (Epiphany III, 2021)

If you like a particular kind of liberal politics, then – at least on the other side of the Ocean – it's been a pretty good week!

Joe Biden has been in office for all of four days, and so far, what we have got? Well, the first three executive orders rather set the tone. There's going to be a lot more mask wearing in America, signalling a new seriousness about coronavirus. The President took the US back into the Paris climate change Agreement, and he ended the automatic travel ban on people coming from seven, mainly Muslim nations. Three, calculated, public, unmistakable repudiations of the last four years. President Biden did these, the first of his signs, in Washington of DC and revealed his programme, and his disciples believed in him.

Pardon the slight air of blasphemy there, although once again large sections of the media and public are doing their best impression of believing that a political leader of the soft left is indeed the Messiah. My point really is about first actions. What the leader does first signals what he or she is about, or at least, what they want you to *think* they're about. Biden will have thought long and hard about the symbolism of those acts. He could have done them next week, the week after – he did them on Wednesday evening, straight from taking his oaths, to make the point. Right, America: we're going *this* way.

What did Jesus do *first*? What was his inaugural gesture, his opening sign? Well, according to John, miraculously producing nearly 1,000 bottles of wine at a wedding.

Hmm.

It seems rather odd, does it not? When you consider he *could* have healed a blind man, or walked on the waves, or fed the five thousand, or even – the Gospels say – raised the dead? It isn't awfully impressive to do conjuring tricks at a party, in a backwater place like Cana. And what does it *mean*? Biden's acts tell us what he wants, what his priorities are. What does Jesus' sign tell us? That he can he do spectacular things? Fine, Ok, but can that be it? Or that he, and so God, isn't a puritanical party-killer after all, that he loves wine and weddings and joy? Well, that's something, but still not *much* of a meaning. After all these years waiting for the Messiah, is that all he has to say?

At which point, two interesting side-thoughts. Maybe, this is why Matthew, Mark and Luke don't tell this story. Perhaps they just didn't see the point, thought it was essentially trivial? Maybe, even Jesus would be slightly annoyed to have too much attention paid to Cana. He hadn't meant it to be a big thing. He hadn't meant it to be a thing at all: his bloomin' mother had pushed him into doing it, even though he'd told her that he was better out of it, that his hour has not yet come (more of that phrase in a moment). It wasn't a carefully considered, full of meaning act – it just sort of happened.

If it *was* that way, if at first Cana seemed an insignificant thing, then it's another example of something characteristic of John's Gospel. The poet Robert Browning wrote about it in his poem *A Death in the Desert*, where he imagines the elderly St. John on his death-bed, looking back over his life, and thinking about how, when he had first known Jesus, he hadn't really understood who He was, what He was about. How it was only with years and years of prayer and reflection and thought that he had slowly come to true knowledge. What first were guessed as points, I now knew stars he says. In other words: what first seemed small, insignificant, minor things – just pinpricks of light in the night sky – now he knows as great globes of truth, fully of burning glory, realities around which worlds revolve. What first were guessed as points, I now knew stars, and named them in the Gospel I have writ.

The story of Cana is just one such point that, in John's mind, under the guidance of the Spirit, swelled into a star. It's all here, thinks John. The story of the wedding feast is absolutely what Jesus was about. It is the perfect start of his ministry. If Jesus *didn't* actually mean to do it, he should have done - and perhaps (I say this with tongue only partly in cheek) it is part of Mary's greatness that she prods him into it. It was always meant to start at a wedding, and always meant to start like this.

Why?

Well, marriages and weddings had always been images close to the hearts of Israel's prophets. God and his people were married: said Isaiah, said Amos, said Ezekiel. And it's not a bad image: for marriage at its best is all about lives coming together in freedom, in joyful, ecstatic, full-bodied celebration, about utter commitment, about being fused together as one. That's what Israel longed for, and – the prophets believed – what God longed for. That God and humanity could be joined together, in joy. It's what, on occasion, Israel and God

seemed to enjoy. Marriage at its best. Marriage at its worst, however, is about betrayal, cheating, abuse, desertion, divorce. About failure and brokenness. The story of Israel and God knew all about those things too.

They've run out of wine, Jesus' mother said to him. They've run out of wine. They know weddings are meant to be about joy and celebration and richness, and they just can't do it anymore. And not just this couple, at this wedding, but all of Israel, all of the world. We know, deep in their hearts, that we are made for something tremendous. We know that the world is meant to be a wedding, that we're made for joy, for unbreakable union with God, for more delight than the best things in the world can even hint at. And we've run out of wine. We just can't do it. Humanity has failed. Its exhausted. Even our very best moments, our wedding days, have failure built in.

Think of it this way, and all of a sudden one of the strangest things in the passage makes sense. They have no wine, says Mary. And Jesus' response is: 'what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' My hour has not yet come. Now, in John's Gospel, Jesus' 'hour' means something very specific. Wherever you see it, it means the Cross. It's what he has come to do, the point of his mission. So when Mary says to him, they have no wine, and he says his hour has not yet come, what he's actually saying is 'I'm not ready to die yet.' They have no wine - I'm not ready to die yet. How does one follow from the other?

Well, it means that Jesus *knows*. He knows the running out of wine is just a sign, just a symbol of a much bigger running out, a much bigger exhaustion, a much bigger failure. At the bottom of those empty jars waits a greater emptiness still, a greater desolation. All the partying in the world can't cover it up, and can't, in the end, resist being swallowed up by it. They have no wine. And they won't, not until Jesus goes up on the Cross, and into the heart of the great failure, into the emptiness, into the exhaustion. Not until his hour has come.

And when it does, well then the Gospel will happen. From his pierced body, life will begin to flow. Do you remember how John tells the story of the Crucifixion? The soldiers want to check that Jesus is truly dead, so they pierce his side, and, the Evangelist tells us, blood and water flows. Blood and water: it wasn't long till the church made the connection – wine. The True Vine has been cut, and the wine is flowing into the parched and desperate world. More wine, and better wine, than they know what to do with. Wine in abundance, and wine forever. Forget your thousand bottles at Cana, even they will run out eventually: this is wine that will never, ever end. This is wine that will raise human beings out of themselves, this is wine that will gladden their hearts and make them sing, wine that has no hangover, no death, but which is simply and forever joy. At long last, everything humans have hoped for – and more – will come real. Everything they dreamed of in their weddings, everything about them, will shine with glory. The life of God will flow into them, and they will be what they were made for. All because of Jesus' hour.

That's what John saw at Cana.

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

To him be the glory forever and ever!