

## Sunday 16th January – The Second Sunday of Epiphany

### Sermon by Harold Toms

Our Gospel reading this morning is the well-known account from John's Gospel of what we often refer to as Jesus' first miracle - the turning of water into wine at a wedding at Cana in Galilee. It is a reading that I have preached from on many occasions. Yet, as I read the passage in preparation for today one of the first things that struck me was the way the Gospel's author does not call this Jesus' first miracle, but his first sign. In fact, John never uses the word miracle for any of the signs that Jesus performs, always preferring to describe them as signs. You will find, in fact, seven signs in the fourth Gospel, which has led Christian scholars to refer to the first twelve chapters as the "Book of Signs". At this, the first of the signs, the author tells us the significance of such signs from Jesus, in that final sentence from the passage when he tells us that by this sign "he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him." John 2:11b

That, fairly obviously, is the purpose of any sign - it points us to something, here Jesus' glory, in which we are called to believe. But, this sign is more than just a simple finger post, in the complexity (and indeed the simplicity) of it, we can get more than just a glimpse of glory that commands our belief.

Following on from the great prologue to the Gospel, deliberately echoing the creation account from the first book of the Old Testament, Genesis, we are shown the same creator power in Jesus that we read of in that Genesis account of the Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters which cover all the earth and transforming those waters into all creation. In the wedding at Cana then, we are hearing about the same creator God with the power to transform nothingness (jars of simple water) into something. And this sign is not something outlandish or alien, Jesus does not for example transform a stone into bread, he does something that any winemaker knows all about, taking a lifeless liquid and giving it life as something richer and better. As a scientist, for me it is changing something inorganic (water) into something organic with flavour, fragrance and (yes) alcohol - all organic chemicals.

Now, I'm going to digress a little here to talk about some of the numbers mentioned in the passage. The fourth Gospel never includes unnecessary details, if numbers are included, it is always for a reason. So, the first number we hear is right at the start of the passage when we hear reference to "the third day" on which the wedding is taking place. This, I think, refers to the time

it has taken for Jesus and his disciples to travel from the location by the River Jordan, where John was baptising to Galilee. Three days is a period of time that we will hear more about as the Gospel unfolds but, for now, we can only look back to where, in the Old Testament, this idea of "the third day" was first used, in Hosea (chapter 6 verse 2): "After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence." Where the prophet calls the people of Israel to return to the Lord. The third day will be the day of restoration.

The next number is the number of jars of water, six. I think the significance of that number is the number of people, including Jesus himself, that he brings to the wedding. A careful reading of the previous chapter tells us that Jesus was accompanied by two disciples when John the Baptist calls him the "Lamb of God" (John 1:35-6). One of those two is Andrew who tells his brother Simon-Peter about Jesus and brings him along to meet Jesus. Then Jesus calls Philip with the words "follow me" (John 1:43) and finally Philip invites Nathanael to join them, whom Jesus describes as "an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." (John 1:47). So in total five disciples which with Jesus makes six extra guests at the wedding feast, the same as the number of jars of water, with perhaps the simple message that the new and enriched life that Jesus brings is for everyone.

The final numbers mentioned are the volume of the jars which we are told was "twenty to thirty gallons" John 2:6. I don't think there is any special meaning to the exact numbers, perhaps that's why an exact number isn't given but rather a range of numbers. The point seems to be to emphasise the enormity of the miracle, this isn't just the odd extra bottle of wine, this is more than enough to satisfy a large crowd, an echo of Jesus' words that he brings "abundant life" (John 10:10b).

So, this first of Jesus' signs, as I've said, is more than just a simple finger post. Not only does it, through the miraculous nature of the sign, reveal Jesus as God's Word, the co-author of all creation with the power to change, enhance, and enrich the world that he created, but it signals something important about why Jesus has come into the world. That reference to "the third day" tells us that he has come not to destroy but to restore. That restoration is open to all, there is one jar for each of the people Jesus brings to the feast, no-one is left out, no-one gets an inferior share of the new creation, the abundant life that Jesus brings. Finally, we are shown the generosity of God, the huge volume of the jars means that there is more than enough for everyone. Jesus' call isn't

just for a few "special" people, it is open to all, and as this Gospel develops we find that means going way beyond Hosea's vision of restoration for Israel, Jesus has come to restore all of creation.

Finally, the passage concludes with the words: "and his disciples believed in him." John 2:11b

The purpose of this sign is to reveal who Jesus is, but it requires a response from us as it did from those five disciples that accompanied him. It calls us to believe in him who has been revealed as creator and redeemer. I mentioned that the first twelve chapters of the Gospel are called the "Book of Signs" and that there are seven signs (in the Bible the perfect number of completeness - the number of days in creation). But, there is one further sign in the Gospel, as Jesus was raised on the first day of a new week, the start of a new life that Jesus invites us all to participate in. Amen.