

Sunday 21st January 2024 – Rev Alison Bruton

Readings: Rev 19: 6-10; John 2: 1-11

I wonder what kind of stories you like to read or films you prefer to watch. My own preference is to have a beginning, a middle and an end with no messing about in the middle; I'm particularly keen on Miss Marple and Poirot stories as they usually have that wonderful bit at the end where everything is neatly explained, the murderer is revealed, and everyone can go home happy. I did once watch the film *Magnolia* and found it so confusing with three apparently unrelated stories of deaths which somehow converge and then diverge again, at some point it even rains frogs! Certainly not my much preferred neat and tidy style of film and not one I would ever want to see again, whereas the Agatha Christies I can watch over and over!

My preference in books and films transfers into my reading of the Bible; I wonder if, like me, you prefer those parts which provide a clear and applicable narrative, whether they be the historical stories in the Old Testament such as those about Abraham, Jacob or Ruth or those in the Gospels which tell us about Jesus' parables or his miracles of healing. Our Gospel passage today doesn't fall into this kind of neat and tidy category, rather it leaves us with a number of loose ends and puzzles which John leaves his readers to figure out for themselves. This morning I'm hoping to raise some questions for you to go away and ponder on as I think that is possibly what John was expecting to achieve in writing this chapter.

Our Gospel writer is known for being highly selective in the narratives about Jesus he chooses to include; in particular he includes only seven miracle stories, far fewer than in any of the other Gospels. This being the case it would be reasonable to imagine that this first miracle should carry with it some considerable significance, and yet this is not at all apparent at first reading. The miracle follows the familiar pattern, that is Jesus meeting human need with miraculous divine provision; but the odd thing here is that the human need he is meeting is wine at a party. Now I'm not sure how you might view this, but the needs of the desperately sick or seriously disabled that Jesus usually healed, or the hunger of the crowds he fed far outshine for me what looks like the indulgence of more wine at a party; yet John chooses this miracle to include in his Gospel. Words we might use to describe this miracle are 'luxury' and 'extravagance' and perhaps these words are essential to understanding the greater significance that John wants us to understand.

So, what is the 'punch line' of this story I wonder? Often the stories that we read in the other Gospels lead up to a significant saying of Jesus but in this case, it is the head waiter who gets to deliver the important line [SLIDE 1] "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

If we take this literally it is a bit of a joke at the host's expense; how silly is he to leave the best wine until last? But don't forget, that the head waiter, unlike us as readers, is unaware of the miraculous divine provision of the wine; as far as he's concerned the host has planned the wine list badly by leaving the good stuff until last. On the other hand, we as readers might take a very different perspective using what we know about Israel's history and Jesus' part in God's plan. Perhaps we might view the miracle as illustrating how God has saved up until last his very best gift to Israel and the world; God's best gift was not in Israel's past

when he gave Moses the law and Israel the land but rather, he has kept the best wine until the coming of Jesus. So this, the first of Jesus' miracles, or 'signs' as they are referred to in John's Gospel, might relate to the coming of Jesus to the history of Israel identifying it as a climax which surpasses everything that has gone before.

For us reading this passage today it is easy to lose sight of the understanding that the head waiter and the guests had at the time. As far as the guests and their hosts were concerned, they might have had to wait a little while for their glasses to be refilled, but as they had all 'had a few' by then, only the most discerning might have noticed the quality of what they were drinking. The only ones who really knew what had taken place were the servants who had had the onerous task of filling the six large twenty gallon stone jars with water. I wonder what they did after the wedding was over and the enormity of what had happened had sunk in. Did some choose to follow Jesus, as we are led to believe in 'The Chosen', the series we have been watching together on Thursday evenings? Did they tell their families and friends? Did they just dismiss it as an unexplained event and carry on with their lives? We will never know.

Returning to the head waiter's comment and its link to the coming of Jesus. In the ancient world oldest was considered to be best, the golden age was always in the past, a bit like we can think today sometimes, 'things ain't what they used to be'. But, there was an expectation in Jewish tradition of the future coming of the Messiah at the end of the age as illustrated by the extravagant joy and celebration at a wedding banquet, much as we read in v 6-9 in our reading from Revelation [SLIDE 2]. The best was indeed yet to come.

These verses describe extravagant, outrageously generous provision by God, not dissimilar then to the extravagant outrageously generous gift of wine given by Jesus at the wedding in Cana. Jesus is enacting in this miracle what he says later on in chapter 10 of John's Gospel [SLIDE 3]: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." We can see here that John is writing about salvation as life, he isn't talking about just living, but of life to the maximum, life that is invigorated and intensified. The temporary stimulation that wine can provide on a superficial level is a symbol of the permanent enhancement of life that salvation brings.

This has made me wonder how often we miss the significance of God's generosity to us in our lives day to day, much as the wedding guests were unaware of where the wine had come from and how really good it was. How often do we fail to recognise God's generosity in terms of his provision for our physical needs, our spiritual needs and our needs as a community of faith?

Perhaps this first miracle of Jesus is helping us to recognise the extravagant and outrageous grace that God has shown us in sending his son to the world as a baby with the ultimate aim of restoring our relationship and of enabling us to be called God's children and heirs. I wonder how well we convey the significance of salvation to those we meet day to day. Do we focus on the redemption and healing that faith can bring, or do we also talk about the fullness of life that is given to us so extravagantly by God? Perhaps both elements would give a fuller picture of what it means for us to follow Christ.

Amen