

## **When the wine runs out – John 2:1-11**

I remember when I was about twelve, my dad, a newly promoted sales manager, hosting a Christmas barbecue the Sunday afternoon before Christmas for his sales team, showing off his new barbecue... and running out of gas... early 1980's – finding a service station open on a Sunday afternoon that was open and could sell you gas, was an interesting exercise. He did find somewhere in the end, but it took more than an hour, and everyone was getting pretty hungry – it would have been disastrous if he hadn't.

And so it was with this wedding in Cana. It was almost a disaster. A disaster far worse than running out of gas.

John tells us that on the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee.

Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples were invited to the wedding. And remember, this was before Jesus public ministry had begun – before he became famous, so it's likely that Jesus – and Mary – had a family connection to the couple being married.

Last week, Lawrence spoke about John the Baptist's ministry – and his fairly rustic lifestyle out in the wilderness by the Jordan: Lawrence reminded us that [The scriptures] tell us he was living on locusts and wild honey, wearing a robe of camel hair with a rope for a belt. So for Andrew and Peter, who had been John's disciples, and presumably living simply out in the wilderness with John, and in similar circumstances to John, we can imagine what it would have been like to follow Jesus into this wedding. This wasn't locusts and wild honey – it was a banquet! With wine flowing! Quite a culture shock, I think.

Weddings are, after all, about the most extravagant celebrations we have these days. No expense is spared to deliver a special day for the bride (and the groom). And it seems that the Jewish tradition in Jesus' time was perhaps even more extravagant, with the celebrations lasting over several days. One difference, though, was that it was the groom's family that were responsible for organising – and paying for – all the festivities.

From John's account of the wedding at Cana, we can reasonably infer Jesus and Mary were on the groom's side of the wedding, because Mary comes to Jesus concerned about the wine. It would be the groom's family who was responsible for the wine, and the groom's family who would be embarrassed if the wine ran out. And it would be something that people living in a small town

like Cana would likely never forget. It's likely that the groom's father would be forever the one who failed to provide his guests with enough wine.

And so Mary comes to Jesus with her concern. It's not even a request. She doesn't say "Make some wine for them", rather she simply says, "They have no more wine." (2:3)

Jesus is at the wedding. Jesus would have known the wine has run out. But Mary tells him.

And Jesus said to her, "Woman, why do you involve me?... "My hour has not yet come." (2:4)

It may seem odd that he addresses his mother as "Woman", and I'm pretty sure my mother wouldn't be impressed if I called her "Woman", but these things change over time, and in Jesus time it was a term of strong affection. If you skip further into John's gospel, to chapter 19, you hear Jesus speaking from the cross to his mother: When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." (19:26)

And Jesus explains that his hour has not yet come. His ministry hasn't started yet. There've been no miracles, no teaching, no casting out of demons, no healings. This isn't the time for him to reveal his power, to fix a trivial problem in a backwater town in Galilee.

But Mary, it seems, has faith: She's brought her concern to Jesus, and then she tells the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them (2:5). (And incidentally, that's another indication that it's her family who's organised the wedding – that she can order the servants around).

In a great display of the keeping the fifth commandment, Jesus honours his mother. He addresses the concern she brought to him.

We know how the story goes, of course, but at the time, his response would have been puzzling. They need wine, but Jesus doesn't seem to do anything about the wine situation - instead he tells the servants to fill these huge jars with water. They're special jars, they're used only for holding water for ritual purification. Don't forget, that everyone is partying on – ritual washing would be the last thing in everyone's minds.

But nevertheless, the servants follow Mary's instruction to do what Jesus said. And they didn't do a half-hearted job, either, verse 7 tells us that they filled

them to the brim. That's a lot of water –around six hundred litres. It might have been sixty bucketfuls to fill all the jars.

Then Jesus said to them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.”(2:8)

Having just filled the jars, Jesus tells them to draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet. The servants are still following Jesus' directions. It is, if you don't know the story, a completely bizarre instruction. Imagine if you were the servant. You've just staggered in from the well with bucket after bucket of water, and poured it into the jars, and then you're told to take it to your boss. You'd be certain that it was water. Jesus hadn't done anything to it. He hadn't touched it, he hadn't added anything to it, he hadn't said any magic words, or made any gestures. He hadn't even prayed over it.

But verse 9 tells us the water had been turned into wine. At this point, the servants were amazed because they knew what happened. But the master of the banquet didn't know what had happened – I guess he thought the servants found some more casks of wine out the back somewhere.

But the water had been changed into wine. And we read that it was not just any wine, but it was the best wine.

And we know it's the best wine because the master of the banquet called the bridegroom and said to him, “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.” (2:9-10)

The guests are drunk, so they probably would be happy with any wine at that point, but the wine that Jesus provided was better than the wine they'd started with. It was extravagant – and it was abundant; don't forget that there was around 600 litres of it! 800 bottles worth - something likely more than 5,000 standard drinks.

Finally, John tells that Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him (2:11).

This is the first of Jesus' signs, the very first of his miracles. And it was done because his mother brought a need to him, and he didn't just satisfy that need, but he did it with extravagance and abundance. What must Andrew and Peter, who had been roughing it with John the Baptist in the wilderness have thought?

And what do we think of it today? Many Christian traditions aren't happy with alcohol at all. Or occasional extravagance either, for that matter. And yet, that's what Jesus delivered!

But regardless of where we stand with the consumption of wine, I think there is a lot for us all to learn from the wedding at Cana.

Going back to the start of the reading, John says "On the third day" – sometimes it takes a while for things to happen, and as I said earlier, they are sometimes significant things.

And when the wine gave out, the Mary went to Jesus and simply said to him, "They have no wine". She simply stated the need. She didn't tell Jesus how he should act or what he should do to satisfy the need. They have no wine – that's what she told him. That was the problem. Jesus knew it too – he was at the same party, after all.

And I think what Mary said is a great model for us in our prayers. When we pray, we're often very precise and tell God exactly what he should do to solve our problems, but really, all we need do is tell God what our problems are. And we should be prepared for our prayers to be answered in ways we don't expect.

I remember hearing from a minister that he'd invited someone along to an event, and this lady had rung him the morning of the event to say, sorry she couldn't come because she was sick.

The minister said he was sorry to hear that, but that he would pray for her. "Oh no" she said "I'm not that sick".

I think we sometimes don't take our concerns to God, because we don't think they're that important. They're not worth bothering God about. Our sickness isn't that bad. The problem we're having with our family isn't that great. Maybe we can work it out by ourselves. Or maybe we just have to put up with the situation. And so on.

But we should know that God knows. God knows our needs. Even if they seem trivial to us – or if they seem impossible for us. And not only does God know them, but God cares about them too. Jesus cared and Jesus acted to look after the needs of a crowd of partygoers in Cana – even though his time had not yet come. And hardly what you might expect as the first sign of his glory!

While we need to remember all of that, we should keep in mind that in order for Mary's request to be satisfied, there were things that needed to be done. The water needed to be brought in, and the jars filled. But sometimes when we pray, we not only ask God to do very specific things, but then we sit back and wait for God to do them.

But Mary put paid to that idea: His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." (2:5)

One of the great things about the kingdom of God coming near, is that we get to be part of it. God's plan for the world doesn't depend on what we do, but what we do is important.

Jesus died and rose again for us, to reconcile us to God – and when we respond to all that God has done for us in Jesus in faith, then that faith should be shown in our gracious obedience to what God wants of us – not least is keeping his commandments.

And our response should be, like the servants and Cana, complete. We should be happy and committed to being part of God's plan. The servants were told to fill the jars with water, and they didn't just splash some water in them, but they filled them to the brim.

We often think of miracles as simply supernatural events that people have no part in – except to benefit from them – but so often miracles are worked through people. Through the servants filling the jars and drawing the wine. Through the boy sharing his loaves and fishes. Or perhaps in development of a Covid vaccine faster than thought possible, the rescue of a Thai soccer team trapped in a flooding cave by amateur caving enthusiasts, and even the spread of the gospel of Jesus in mainland China and in Korea.

But whatever our contribution to the kingdom of God is, we need to be fully committed to it. Whether it's coming to church whenever we possibly can, or putting all our heart and mind into our reading of the bible, or praying, or greeting people when we arrive at church and so on. As the saying goes, if something is worth doing, it's worth doing well.

Of course, life is busy and the world is distracting. All sorts of things are going on for each one of us and for all of us. Sometimes it's just hard. We muddle on. We hold things together. We make do. But the wine of our lives is running out.

As that great old song reminds us: “Oh, what peace we often forfeit, Oh, what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer!”

Whatever our problems might be, whatever our world’s problems might be, even if we think they are impossible, or even if we think they’re insignificant or mundane, we need to turn to Jesus, as Mary did, and take the problems of our lives to him. Whatever they might be.

Amen.