

## Talk for 10:30 zoom service, Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> January 2021: Epiphany 3

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Three years ago when these readings were set by the lectionary I gave the talk at the lay-led service in the church hall, and was able to use a wheely-bin as a visual aid! Current circumstances mean I can't repeat "The One With The Wheely-Bin", but I would have wanted to take this talk in a different direction anyway.

The story of the wedding at Cana - and particularly Jesus's actions there - is only told in St John's Gospel. There, it is described as the first of the miraculous signs that Jesus performed, revealing his glory and causing his disciples to believe in him. In fact, John's Gospel features just seven miracles performed by Jesus: turning water into wine in this passage, (remotely) healing a Jewish official's son (4:43-54), healing an invalid on the Sabbath (5:1-15), feeding 5,000 men (plus women; 6:1-15), walking on the water (6:16-21), healing a man born blind (9:1-41) and bringing Lazarus back to life four days after he died (11:1-45). It says that Jesus performed many other miraculous signs (presumably including the many miracles described in the other gospels), but those seven are mentioned explicitly and in detail so that the readers will believe that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God, and will come to inherit eternal life. Most of the passages state that many of those who witnessed the signs believed in Jesus as a result.

What would these miraculous signs have meant to the people who witnessed them? What would they have told them about who Jesus was, and why he had come? And what was John intending to make clear by including these particular seven miracles out of hundreds? The first thing to note is that none of the miracles is performed "just for show", to brow-beat people into following Jesus. They are certainly performed to demonstrate that God was with Jesus in all his fullness, but that fullness includes God's heart for healing, forgiveness and reconciliation as well as the power to bring that about. Three of the signs are physical healings, including one from a distance (Jesus told the official "Your son will live" and at that very hour, miles away, the son recovered) and one in contravention of the religious authorities' rules (on the Sabbath). The raising of Lazarus showed that Jesus had power over death itself, though he also felt and shared the grief of the bereaved sisters - sharing our pain at losing loved ones even as he opens the way to eternal life.

What about the first sign, turning water into wine? Well, that saved the bridegroom (who would have been responsible for providing all the food and drink for probably several days of festivities) from social embarrassment, but since most of the people - probably including the bridegroom! - didn't even know the miracle had taken place its main importance seems to have been its symbolism to the disciples who had just begun to follow Jesus. The water that Jesus took had been provided for the ceremonial purification rite demanded by the Jewish Law - it was used for ritual washing. Yes, it would wash dirt off your hands (and feet) but it was purely symbolic of our need to be cleansed of our wrong-doing before God. Jesus turned that into wine (and very good wine indeed, according to the Master of Ceremonies). Wine then, as now, was associated with feasting, celebration, joy. The water might make you ready (in some way) for the feast, but the wine is *part of the feast itself*.

So the symbolism is clear: the old Law hinted at how we needed to change (or be changed) to be put right with God, but what that right life with God will be like is shown by the teaching that Jesus brings and demonstrates (backed up later by the gift of the Holy Spirit to allow us to carry it through). Put in other terms, Jesus does not come just to save us *from* the consequences of our wrong-doing (i.e. separation from God), but he also saves us *for* eternal life in God's Kingdom. Right from the start of his ministry, Jesus is declaring that he won't just be telling us to do the old things better, he will be showing us how to live in a completely new way to please God: mercy, justice and love for neighbour (even if they are our enemies). A vision of life in that Kingdom is given in today's reading from Revelation - and it's a(nother) wedding feast, symbolising the union between Christ and the church, the community of all believers. Rejoicing, exulting, and being blessed are the order of the day.

But to finish, a couple of questions for you to consider in the coming days. What do those seven miraculous signs mean to *you*? And what signs have shown *you* the way to faith in Jesus?