

# The Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11)

Sermon preached at Harwell and Chilton  
on 24th January 2021 by Revd Dr Jonathan L Mobey

## A. Introduction

### Weddings

A wedding is a good time to reminisce and look back, the wedding speeches often recounting stories about the bride and groom and remembering their courtship. In addition a wedding is an opportunity to look forward, to plan and anticipate. The wedding vows, after all, include promises about the future and the couple future life together is toasted. So a wedding is a time to look back and also to look forward.

### A sign

Our reading about a wedding also looks both backwards and forwards. According to John, the turning of water to wine is the first of the miraculous signs that Jesus performed. This miracle is described as a sign, and a sign something that exists in order to point to something else, in this case to a deeper reality.

Imagine being on a journey and coming to a signpost that tells you – pointing in one direction – where you have been and – pointing in the other direction – where you are headed. In a similar way, the turning of water to wine is a sign that points in two directions at once: it points back and it points forwards, pointing to the Old and to the New. And this wonderful sign,

pointing in these two directions, we are told, revealed something of Jesus' glory. This sign showed something about Jesus, so that the his disciples might put their faith in him. Most of what I have to say today falls under these two headings: the Old and the New.

### Wedding guests

Just before we get into that, though, I wanted us to think about the eavesdropped conversation between Jesus and his mother:

When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." "Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." (Jn 2:3–5).

It's great to have this little insight into the relationship between Jesus, now around 30 years of age, and his mother, who was almost certainly widowed by this time. Cana was only a few miles from Jesus' home town, Nazareth, and so explains why Mary and Jesus had been invited to the wedding, a seven day celebration to which as many people as possible were invited. Mary may well have been helping out with the catering or serving, which would explain why she became aware of the developing crisis in the drinks department. Jesus was there with his six friends and it may be that Mary felt that Jesus ought to take some responsibility for the extra strain that these strapping lads were presumably putting on the catering. I daresay hearty fisherman would be able to knock back a few skinfuls of wine. Furthermore, guests would have been

expected to contribute in some way to a community wedding celebration, and Mary trusted that Jesus would find a way to sort out this tricky situation. Up to this point Jesus hadn't performed any miracles, so presumably she was not expecting him to do a miracle. But although she didn't know what he would do, she trusted him implicitly.

### **Cross purposes**

Jesus' response to his mother's request sounds a bit harsh to our ears, but it was in fact politely respectful. It was probably intended by Jesus to correct any misunderstanding that he might take orders from anyone other than his heavenly Father (cf. 5:30; 8:29). This little exchange between mother and son suggests that they are speaking somewhat at cross purposes. **This can sometimes be the case between mothers and sons!** Mary's overriding concern was for the success of the wedding and the potential embarrassment of the wedding party hosts. Jesus' focus is on his main mission, indicated by his reference to his 'time'. The time to which Jesus refers is the God-ordained time at which he would be betrayed, crucified and raised, and Jesus knew that once he started on his public ministry of miracles and teaching, that he would begin on the road towards the cross. Jesus really is speaking of *cross purposes*! As it is, in response to his mother's request, Jesus *does* act, but in a semi-secret way. As a result, it is only his disciples and the servants that are party to the first of his miraculous signs, a sign that points backwards and forwards.

## **B. Pointing backwards to the Old**

So to our first main point: how is the turning of water to wine a sign that points *backwards*?

### **Water to blood**

**I want you to try to bring to mind the original biblical miracle of water transformation? Asking people to shout out the answer is slightly difficult to do online, and I won't ask for hands up. Your clue is a five letter word beginning with M. Not the words is not 'Mobey', it's 'Moses'!** The original miracle of water transformation was the first miracle of Moses, in which the water of the River Nile was turned to blood.<sup>i</sup> The miracle of water to wine is a sign that points back to Moses and in particular to the Law given through Moses. This is what is represented by the six stone jars full of water. But why is this?<sup>ii</sup>

### **The Law and washing**

Well, you don't have to read very far about the Law before you realise that an overriding concern of the Law was purity: ceremonial and moral purity.<sup>iii</sup> A key part of the Law was the requirement for ceremonial washing which served as a vivid illustration of the purity and holiness that God required of his people. In time, however, people began to think of the symbol as the reality.<sup>iv</sup> But of course the external act of removing dirt and impurity from the skin was never able to remove guilt and impurity from the heart (cf Mk 7:15ff).

It would be a bit like discovering an old wooden chair that is riddled through with woodworm – so dry and brittle that it is almost powder. You can enthusiastically get out your paintbrush and give a real good coat of paint, and it might look pretty good, but if anyone tried to sit on it, it would collapse in a cloud of dust.

It is the same with any human activity. There is no religious observance or altruistic act that can purify us within. Going to church, receiving communion, going on pilgrimage, meditating, or helping the poor. These can be good things and good can come of them, but they do not morally cleanse us. The stain of sin is too deep to be simply rinsed away with the water of human activity.

### **Water inadequate to truly cleanse**

So this is the way that Jesus' miracle is a sign that points backwards: to the old religion of Moses. Those six stone water jars used for ceremonial washing represented the law of Moses. The Law vividly demonstrated<sup>v</sup> how humans are in *need* of forgiveness and moral cleansing. But whilst the Law highlighted the *problem*, it could never be the *solution*.<sup>vi</sup>

The Law was a bit like a dental disclosing tablet – you know the sort. You chew these highly coloured tablets and swill them around in your mouth. When you bare your teeth, all the areas of dental plaque that had previously been hidden are displayed in all their horror. I would demonstrate what I'm talking about

but I would fear for the results and possible scare any children watching!

The Law of Moses is like a disclosing tablet – able to demonstrate the problem but quite unable to do anything about it. The way that the miracle of water to wine points back is in highlighting how the Old Law of Moses highlights our need for moral cleansing, but is unable to achieve it. But Jesus does something amazing. He takes those old jars and does a wonderful transformation. Jesus came to do what the Law could never achieve.<sup>vii</sup>

### **C. Pointing forwards to the New**

This brings us to how the turning of water to wine is a sign that points forwards, from the Old to the New, from Moses to Jesus.

#### **Wine representing Jesus' cleansing blood**

Whereas Moses turned water to blood, Jesus turned water to wine. Wine represents the blood of Jesus. As we remember in the service of Holy Communion, quoting the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, he said of the wine, “**This is my blood, shed for you all for the forgiveness of sins**” (cf Mt 26:28).

The wonderful truth to which this miracle points like a sign is that the spiritual washing clean that all humans need is achieved not by religious observance but by having faith in the blood of Jesus. I'll repeat that because this is the point of this sermon. Listen up and then you can go back to sleep again:

*The spiritual washing clean that all humans need is achieved not by religious observance but by having faith in the blood of Jesus.*

It is because of the death of Jesus on the cross that we can be forgiven, and be morally cleansed. Believers are ‘bathed’ once and for all when they become Christians, that washing symbolised in their baptism. Just before receiving communion we often pray “cleanse and feed us with the precious body and blood of your Son”. No amount of ceremonial washing will get us clean before God, we can only be made clean, spiritually pure, because of Jesus’ death on the cross.

### **Robes made white by Jesus’ blood**

Now we might not *feel* very pure and we may not *behave* in a way that is very pure, but if we put out faith in Jesus, the Bible says that in God’s eyes, we are purified from all sin.<sup>viii</sup> However large, however small, there is no sin that creates a stain too great to be cleansed by Jesus’ blood. An important image in the Bible is that of the white robe, representing how God sees those who have faith in his Son. **That is what a white surplice over a black cassock represents:** the righteousness and purity that God gives to believers to cover over their own sinfulness and impurity. As a result of the sin in our lives, it is as if our own clothes are stained and spoilt. But to be allowed into the presence of a Holy God we need to be wearing clothes that are pure white, clothes provided for us by God himself.

On several occasions, my eldest daughter, Jasmine, has been as bridesmaid. It’s nice to see a cute two year old walking up the aisle in a beautiful dress. My daughter, however, has always been a lively soul, and when younger would much rather be climbing trees than standing still. As a tiny girl (and even now if the truth be told) she finds it very difficult to stay clean. It was always a massive challenge to keep the mud and grass stains off her satin frock for long enough to be able to accompany the bride up the aisle and be semi-presentable for the photos. But if you want to be a bridesmaid you are expected to keep your frock clean!

The same is true for those wanting to be with God. And as it says in the Book of Revelation, those who stand before God wear white robes, washed clean and made white in the blood of the Lamb (cf Rev 7:14). The only thing that will remove the stain of our sin and make us acceptable before God is putting our faith and trust in Jesus, who died and rose again.

### **The New superior to the Old**

And so the cleansing water turned to wine points like a sign to and represents the cleansing blood of Jesus, the way we can be washed clean and made right with God. As wine is superior to water, so the New Covenant is superior to the Old. The way to be clean that Jesus provides is superior to the Law of Moses, which was not really able to cleanse at all. As it says at the beginning of John’s gospel, “**the law was given through Moses;**

grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (Jn 1:17). *The Old gives the diagnosis, the New gives the cure.*

### Joy and celebration

One final comment on wine and what it tells us about the New life we can have when we have faith in Jesus. Wine is a commonly used biblical symbol for joy and celebration. Wine represents the fullness of life that Jesus offers to those who put their trust in him a life characterised by joy, joy that begins now and lasts forever.

The kingdom of heaven is in the Bible likened to a wedding feast (cf Mt 22; 25; Rev 19) and at the wedding feast in our story, Jesus goes from being guest to host. Having come to the end of their own resources, the giver of all good things steps in to provide a superabundance of first class wine which represents never ending joy. The world can only provide limited fulfilment, and the world’s joy eventually runs out, for some people sooner than others. Jesus, however, provides joy that is ever new and ever satisfying, for all who put their trust in him. The master of ceremonies was right on the money when he observed that “**you have saved the best till now**” (2:10b). God has kept his best gift, his Son, until now – the age of the New Covenant. Only Jesus can truly make us clean, and only Jesus can truly satisfy, giving us joy that we can begin to taste in this life and which is brought to fulfilment in the kingdom of heaven.

### D. Conclusion

And so to conclude. According to John, the signs in his gospel are “**written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name**” (Jn 20:31). The miracle of the turning of water to wine at the wedding at Cana points like a sign backwards to the Law of Moses and how it demonstrates our need for forgiveness and cleansing, something that cannot be achieved by ceremony or religious observance. It also points like a sign forwards to the death of Jesus that can cleanse us from every sin and cause God to look upon us as pure and holy. The result is joy, the joy of fullness of life begun now and stretching out forever in the heavenly feast. If, having seen his glory, we put our faith in Jesus, eternal joy in the kingdom of heaven will be ours.

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<sup>i</sup> This happened as result of the refusal of Pharaoh to obey God’s command to let his people go and blood represents judgement against the Egyptians.

<sup>ii</sup> Once free from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites, through Moses, were given the Law: not just the Ten Commandments but hundreds of other detailed regulations about how to live and worship.

<sup>iii</sup> When the Law was first given at Mount Sinai, the Israelites had to wash their clothes as a symbolic reminder of the vast separation between people and God.

<sup>iv</sup> and it is this attitude that the Old Prophets and Jesus challenged

<sup>v</sup> through the Temple worship, the sacrifices, and purity laws

<sup>vi</sup> As the writer of the Hebrews says, “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves... it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb 10:1-4).

<sup>vii</sup> As the Hebrews passage goes on to say, “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Therefore... we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:4-10).

<sup>viii</sup> “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 Jn 1:7).