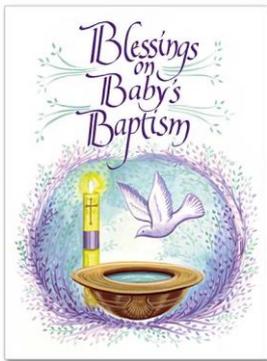




St Andrew's



United Reformed Church
Penylan Road, Roath, Cardiff. CF24 3PF

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Weekly newsletter - issue 97

Dear friends,

One thing that studying the Gospel of John shows us, is that it is full of symbolism and allegory. The story that has become known as the '**turning water into wine event**' opens with the words: "**On the third day...**" The story here is heavy with allegory in which John may have been alluding to Jesus' resurrection after three days. John is preparing us for what he is building up to throughout his Gospel: that Jesus Christ would be buried, and on the third day he would show up, having risen from the dead. He would then make preparations for

the great wedding feast of the Lamb of God, when he would gather together all who would be his guests into the Kingdom of God. Jesus' first sign would point to his final sign by which he would show his glory.

In the Gospel story we see that after Jesus and his disciples arrive at the wedding, Jesus' mother approached him and said, "**They have no more wine.**" Some believe that the bridal family may have been his relatives, or perhaps it was even the wedding of one of his younger sisters. They believe that Mary was not asking for, or expecting, a miracle, but was saying, in effect, "The arrival of you and your disciples has caused a problem. Please send some of them to purchase more wine." The more likely scenario is that Jesus' mother has known all along who he was and what he was capable of. She understands that his public ministry began with his baptism and the calling of the first of his disciples. She expects that he will do something wonderful. And so, even over his reluctance to start his ministry before its time, she tells the servants: "**Do whatever he tells you.**"

Jesus' mother knows that HE cares about people. He cares about all our needs, not just our spiritual needs. He cares about people being unnecessarily embarrassed. He cares about people enjoying themselves. Jesus is the kind of person we would want at our party. He knows how to have a good time. In fact, in the New Testament, we often see him at parties to which he has been invited, and he is always the life of the party. He enjoyed himself so much that his detractors called him a "**glutton and drunkard.**" No one ever accused Jesus of promoting a dour, rigid, emotion-stifling religion — just the opposite. Wherever Jesus went there was life and joy.

He stated that his life mission was, as he said, that his joy might be in us and that our joy might be complete. He has come to bring his joy, and there is joy everywhere in our world. He is the God of irrepressible joy, and he has come to share it. He offers the wine of joy to all those who are thirsty for life — for those who will come and drink.

He takes care of our needs both great and small. There is nothing too ordinary to pray about. He is just as concerned about the little problems of your life as he is at the big problems. If he was a little god he would be able to take care of only the major things, but since He is the great God, He is able to take care of all the things in our lives. He sees every sparrow each time they land on the ground. He keeps track of the number of hairs on your head. He calls the stars by name. He is surely, a great God who is too big not to be concerned about the everyday things of our lives.

NEWS

There is some good news to share with you this week. Firstly, we will participate with Angela, Chris, and Daniel in the baptism of young Abigail. The event has been a long time coming as all previous attempts have been thwarted by intervention by the pandemic restrictions. But with a reduced number of participants we are going to officially welcome Abi into the household of God.

Next I ventured to take a peek into the flooded cellar behind the organ this week to find that all the water appears to have subsided and that the floor was dry. Hopefully the organ bellows have also now completely dried out and that the organ will be back in action soon. And thirdly the news on the reopening of the Coffee Court is positive.

It is planned that the Coffee Court will reopen on Saturdays and Sundays and hopefully revert to its seven day a week times from February on. Thanks go once again to Wayne, Nathan, and their friends for spending the time when the area was closed, purchasing and painting tables and benches. Also the response to the request for toiletries to be distributed to patients in Cardiff Hospitals has been phenomenal. The South Room, the boys house and Nathan's van have been filled with 'smellies' which will be distributed on the weekend. This means that patients who are not receiving visitors and toiletries will benefit greatly.

We have provided our New Year '**Thoughts and Prayers**' video, which, as always, can be found by holding down the Ctrl button and clicking on the YouTube link: <https://youtu.be/CUwJsETAN-M>. The video is also available on St Andrew's, and my Facebook pages.

May God bless and keep you all safe.

Des

Minister - St Andrew's URC Cardiff and Penuel Nelson

SERMON

There is something almost mystical about the beginning of a new year. It is exactly what Epiphany calls forth, with the coming of Light, with the announcing of the coming Kingdom of God, and the revealing of the well-beloved Son at his baptism. All these ensure that we enter into a new year, a new season of hope. All will be different, we pray, and this will be a better year than the last or two. God only knows how desperately we need this hope in our troubled world; 2020/21

were tragic years for so many people caught in the misery of the pandemic, war and of poverty. So much has gone wrong. But even with this awareness, we human beings still are able to cling to hope. We always think the new must be better than the old, and we enter each new year hoping.

For many the beginning of the new year starts with a kind of partying that reveals only desperation. For others it comes in quietly, maybe in regretful loneliness; for those of us who delight in God's steadfast love, as Psalm 36; verses 5 - 10 affirms, we prefer to study and pray, to savour the season of Epiphany with its many-layered meanings.

The Gospel of John is quite different from the synoptics, and there is something absolutely fitting in the story he chooses to tell of the first sign that ushers in the public ministry of Jesus. It happens at a marriage feast. So many hopeful firsts come together in this story.

It is in the Gospel of St John 2:1-11, that we find the first of Jesus' signs — what the other Gospels call "***miracles***"— which was turning water into wine. Our Lord's first sign that inspired his disciples to really believe in him was not healing a sick person, bringing someone back from the dead, forgiving sins, or even exorcising a demon.

We are told that it was making gallons of excellent wine, about one hundred fifty gallons of wine, which served to make a party last longer. Does this make Jesus seem like a more sophisticated saviour, someone we would be less embarrassed about introducing to our friends than, say, '***Jesus the exorcist or Jesus who touches lepers?***' Or is Jesus' first miracle a little trivial?

Maybe it's not about Jesus loving a good party, although by all accounts he did. His opponents called him a glutton and a drunkard,

and he often got into trouble for sharing a table fellowship with the wrong kind of people.

And maybe was not just trivial, or the evangelist John wouldn't have used one of his big words—**"sign"**— when describing the event. The other things John calls **"signs"** that Jesus did include healing the sick, raising people from the dead, feeding a multitude on five loaves and two fish, and appearing, resurrected from the dead, among his amazed disciples. So **"signs"** are big, important, meaningful, reality-shifting events.

But how is making a ridiculous amount of wine at a small-town wedding reception on par with raising the dead, feeding the hungry, walking through locked doors to show the scars on his hands and feet and side and proclaiming that death has been defeated? As a **"sign,"** what does turning water into wine point to? What makes this wine so important?

A wedding or another big family celebration then, as for many of us now, was a time for good wine, a time to spend scarce money on the rarer things of life — a time to share food and drink that were special, not every day. And because wine was something connected with special times and celebrations, it was a great sign in the Bible of the heavenly banquet, what's called the eschatological — final — feast at the end of time as we know it.

The prophet Isaiah, in chapter 62: verses 1 – 5 described the age to come, the promised fulfilment of God's plans and dreams for the end of time, as follows:

"On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled

with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

This is Isaiah's image for the end of time, when all is brought to its fulfilment: an end to tears, a clear manifestation of our God, and a great feast for all peoples, a feast of really good meat, rich, fatty food, and wine better than the best you've ever tasted.

Furthermore, Isaiah tells us that a symbol of God's joy over His people, of His deep love for people, is a bride and a bridegroom and the delight and rejoicing they share, like at a marriage celebration.

So, when Jesus makes litres of wine at a wedding reception, it is a sign, pointing to the scriptural promises that God will bring all people to God's own self, that God will pour down His love and the

abundance of His joy on all people, that the perfection that lies in God's great future is real. But more — that the future abundance and grace and joy has begun in Jesus Christ. The future is now, the glory and grace and love of God are available right now.

That's why turning water into wine is the first of the signs Jesus did, and the rest of the signs follow. It's saying, look! God's future is breaking in now, has begun in Jesus. What else does God's future look like? It looks like hungry people being fed, sick people being

healed, dead people being raised from death, death itself being defeated.

God's future is available to us now. In the very present. In this life. We don't have to wait to experience hope. And we can trust that God will keep His promises for the end of time, because Jesus already brought the possibility of joy and hope and new life now, even into this world. Perfection is not yet fully present; perfect wholeness still lies ahead. But trust Jesus — God will keep God's promises. God's future has already broken into the present in Jesus.

So, how do we participate in this new life, God's perfect, joy-filled future available now?

Mary gives the answer when she says: **'do whatever he tells you.'** Seek life at its source. Seek joy at its source. Seek to know what Jesus Christ asks of us. This is the essence of discipleship. This is the key for joining Jesus in his new way of being in the world. This is the key: do whatever he tells us.

Notice that the people who knew where the water turned into wine had come from, the people who grasped first-hand, who saw with their own eyes the amazing thing happening in their midst, were the servants. The ones who did what Jesus told them to do. While everyone else around them was caught up in whatever was going on at the party, the servants got to witness a miracle.

And they got to participate. They got to have a hand in Jesus' first sign. They just did what Jesus told them to do:

"Fill the jars with water" and they do.

No arguing, "We need wine, not water."

"Now draw some out" and they do.

No complaining, "What's that going to achieve?"

"And take it . . . So they took it."

No, "Hey, Jesus, I have a better idea . . ."

They just did the simple, straightforward things Jesus told them to do and they got to participate in a miracle.

'Do whatever Jesus tells you.' Water becomes the finest wine. The mundane becomes miraculous.

Jesus tells us all some very simple, straightforward things to do.

There are lots of verbs in the gospels — commands, instructions that really aren't even that hard to understand when it comes right down to it that are about simple obedience. Jesus tells us to do the following things: **love, share, give, serve, listen, learn, worship, pray.**

God even gives us particulars, contexts and jobs and families, a community, and a church family in which to be obedient. Love **him**. Love **her**. Love **them**. Share our money, our time, our particular gifts, our ability with **that child**, with **that elder**, with **that family**. Worship with our congregational family. Pray at our table, at our bedside, with our teenager, for our spouse, our partner, our parent, and even with this world. Listen for what Jesus tells us to do. Then, do it. We may find ourselves as part of a miracle, we may get a glimpse, a sign of God's perfect future, a sign of God's heavenly feast, even right here, right now.

Amen.

PRAYERS

Eternal Father, you are the maker of us all, and we are your creation, people formed in your image, as individuals, as community. We are formed, fed, and furnished with understanding of who you are and to whom we belong. We are worshipping you Lord in recognition of your calling, of your communicating, of your caring to invite us to share in your creative and healing work. We come to you Lord because we have heard you speak in us and through others. Help us, Heavenly Father, to ever respond to you and your invitation to your grace... Lord hear our prayer...

God of all our moments, of our days and our nights, you speak and you act in the world around us, not only to call all people to you, but also to direct and guide us in the way of healing and true wholeness. Awaken us Lord, to hear what you would say to us. Help us to open our ears, our eyes, and our hearts to your presence. Help us to know when it is your voice we are hearing, and when it is our prejudices and desires to which we are paying heed.... Lord hear our prayer...

Lord, we pray that your church may rise up with renewed commitment in answer to your call, that your people may be instruments of your grace and love.... Lord hear our prayer....

We pray for those who consider themselves inadequate and dismiss or avoid your calling in their lives. Give them a new vision, a vision in which you are their strength and their hope... Lord hear our prayer....

We pray for those who, in answering your call, must leave the known for the unknown, the oasis for the desert, the comfortable for the uncertain. Grant them courage and steadfast faith...

Lord hear our prayer....

We pray too, today, O Lord, for those in want and need - for those of us and of the larger community who suffer in body or in soul. We remember before you those who are ill, at home or suffering in hospital, along with those who are waiting to receive treatment. Take into your hands, we pray Lord, the souls of those whose days on earth have come to a close. And may your comfort be with the relatives and friends of those recently bereaved. Father be with all those who need your presence at this time.... Lord hear our pray.....

Loving Father - bless us all with an abundant faith, a fruitful ministry, a joyful life. Bless us and all those who gather together to continue the work of Jesus, who came to heal, save, and deliver us all.

Amen.