

## The Wedding at Cana: Water into Wine

My theme this morning is about exploring the differences between disappointed resignation, and hopeful dissatisfaction.

Travelling a lot on public transport in London over the Christmas period, my eye was caught by one of those artfully-produced tube adverts (what talented people advertisers are!).

It's a Christmas advert for the money transfer company, *Western Union*. It shows twin boys, well-dressed for a family event. One of them has just opened his Christmas present to reveal a hideous pair of y-fronts which he is holding up. There is a look on his face of pure disgust. Beside him stands his twin brother, who clearly has not yet opened his present, but is now exactly aware of what he's getting. The caption reads "When I said *anything*, I meant money".

We had our own family version of this, this year. In the family Christmas lists circulated on WhatsApp beforehand our young teenage nephew's requests were a bit useless, 'he likes food' was the comment. Jo, ever imaginative, decides to prepare a little hamper of Reading foodstuffs, drawing on our local multicultural population. A few days before Christmas, I am sent out to procure 'something Polish'. I think it fair to say that the expression on our nephew's face as he opened his tub of pickled roll-mop herrings wasn't that dissimilar to the one in the tube advert. "When I said likes food..."

Ah, disappointment.

Our reading from John's Gospel this morning tells the story of the Wedding at Cana. Those with longish memories, might recall a sermon I gave last March on the way that John's Gospel is structured around seven 'signs'. John, the writer, doesn't call these miracles, because they seem to have been chosen more for their symbolic value. These seven signs don't just show Jesus doing something surprising, they also convey a deeper message.

Here are the seven signs. Ours is the first....

You may also recall that I mentioned how these seven are matched in pairs which nestle within one-another and surround the central sign, the miraculous feeding. Today's story of the wedding at Cana pairs up with the sign-story of the raising of Lazarus (which was what last year's sermon was on).

These two stories share some curious details: the rock-cut stone water jars at Cana, parallel the rock-cut tomb that holds Lazarus's body. In both stories we find women urging Jesus to act (in today's story it's his mother Mary, and in the Lazarus story it's another Mary and her sister Martha). Both stories deal with major events in life: a marriage on the one hand, and a funeral on the other. Finally, in both stories, we see Jesus trying to delay his response, a detail that may well puzzle us: 'It's not my hour' Jesus says to Mary in today's story. And in the Lazarus story Jesus puts off returning to see Lazarus for two days, despite hearing about Lazarus's illness.

As I explained, last time, John's gospel isn't a straight historical account, and in that he differs from the other three gospels. John's is a poetic and theological retelling of the life of Jesus. In these two signs, the Wedding at Cana and the Raising of Lazarus, the writer seems to want to tell us about how in Jesus there can occur a breaking-in of new life into the midst of something going wrong: into the midst of the disappointment of a wedding going sour; and into the midst of the grief of a life cut short.

Why both these symbolic stories involve the theme of Jesus' delay or reluctance to intervene can perhaps be understood if we reflect that when first-century Jews thought about their final hopes of

God's saving intervention, they focused on two particular images. God's final vindication of goodness, they imagined, would be like a glorious wedding of heaven and earth (something shared by Christians as we heard about in the Book of Revelation reading), and secondly this final vindication would involve a general resurrection of the dead.

So, John's showing Jesus as reluctant to intervene as saviour in the wedding and at the funeral, is a kind of way of saying 'the end you hope for isn't yet here, it isn't *the* end, life is still carrying on'. And yet, in both stories Jesus is shown acting on the need to provide *something* in the meantime: and so, the wedding quietly restarts with people puzzled about what's just happened, and Lazarus is resurrected, but Jesus blurs things by saying 'he was only asleep'.

Both stories therefore are about getting a foretaste of the end *now*. Rather than leaving things with a sense of disappointment, they show people given a glimpse of unexpected hope – just enough to keep them going.

It's as if John the Gospel writer seems to want to say that Christian faith certainly includes a number of hopes for the future, for a world beyond what we can currently see, but it also includes experiences of those hopes breaking through now to sustain us.

Just under a fortnight ago, I was attending the annual conference of university chaplains, and one of our speakers was the University of Sussex's humanist chaplain, James Croft. Last year James was appointed the first humanist to lead a university chaplaincy team in the UK. I guess, I have tended to think of humanism as a sort of individualised belief system, and so it was fascinating to hear about James' background as a pastor of a major Humanist congregation in the United States

Here's his former congregational building in St Louis Missouri, and the website contains many of the social and ethical activities that you'd expect of a church, including Sunday morning children's groups.

For James and his community, meaning focuses on the here and now, and acting out of what is believed to be rational and ethical. You can get a flavour of one kind of (admittedly rather simplistic) humanist approach from the Humanists UK website which has a handy online quiz entitled, 'How Humanist Are You?'

Here are two examples of the 10 questions (apparently, you're only allowed to pick one answer):

"When I look at a beautiful natural view I think that... it must have been designed by God, *or* we ought to do everything possible to protect this for future generations, *or* this is what life is all about, I feel good."

Here's another:

"I think the Universe ... was created as part of a divine plan, *or* is a natural place and can be understood best through science, *or* is a natural place, but I do also believe there is another supernatural layer to reality".

I'm sure there will be some religious people who can answer Humanist UK's questionnaire clearly. But for several of their questions I was utterly unable to pick a single answer. On one-run through I come out as 77% humanist.

I wonder if a distinctive and healthy gift of some part of the Methodist and Anglican churches might be to encourage that sort of liberal fuzziness, where we bring together scripture, tradition, reason and experience, rather than forcing them as alternatives.

So don't get me wrong, I don't want to show disrespect for humanism. Engaging with others' beliefs is, though, a wonderful way to be clearer about your own. It's certainly clear that many humanists like James are deeply ethical people. And being religious clearly doesn't give us any monopoly on goodness. (On the contrary I suspect that many of us are utterly baffled at the religious support Trump gets.) It's just that alongside being very happy to accept the wisdom of science; the importance of focusing on the here and now; and being sceptical about religious claims; I do wonder whether there is still room for mystery. Is what we can touch and see and evidence by measuring, all there is?

Many of us as religious people can testify to the strange interruptions of God in our lives: moments when the water turns to wine. They happen when a text suddenly speaks to us in an unexpected way and just addresses our experience exactly; they happen when an awkward silence becomes a pool of contemplation from which we can drink and find deep nourishment, calm and empowerment for action; they happen when the music and words of a song strangely break us open to sense something astonishingly beautiful that feels real beyond the fleeting moment and feeds us on our journey; they happen when receiving a wafer in the hands feels saying yes to a gift, and in turn becoming part of that gift; they happen when we read the story of Jesus or look at an icon of him and say, with a deep sense of recognition: 'yes, *that* is what life is really about, that is how to be human', and noticing that, finding that same spirit at work in us.

These are foretaste moments, moments where water becomes wine, where the normal somehow becomes *more*. They are, annoyingly, often unplanned and uncontrollable. They may well not occur as often or as clearly as we'd like. And yet when they do happen they give us hope.

To be sure, it's a dissatisfied hope, a restless one, we want more for our world: more joy, more healing, more peace, it's not enough. When we watch the news, our response isn't: that's all there is; we want better. And, of course, that desire for better is shared by many, including humanists, with whom we can partner to bring it about. It's just that for us this restless desire seems rooted and empowered by something other, which from time to time we already taste. We aren't in charge of it, it surprises us, and we call it God.