

THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON



Sunday 24 January 2021

ST MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER

JOHN 2: 1-11

The Revd Jonathan Aitken Sermon for Sunday 24 January 2021
St Matthew's Westminster, 20 Great Peter Street

Weddings, even in lockdown, are joyful occasions.

I feel this right now because I am just about to marry my second couple since the pandemic began and as the complicated preparations, precautions and rehearsals get under way, I can still feel love, happiness and the blessings of God triumphing over all earthly restrictions.

So, let's bring some matrimonial joy into our lives this Sunday morning by pondering on today's Gospel, which on one level is a very simple human story. All about a village wedding party which almost went wrong.

To get the full impact of this tale, please try to listen to it on two levels.

With one ear, enjoy the charming narrative, which makes an easy listening sitcom that a child can understand. But with the other ear, tune into deeper meanings from the characters which reveal profound messages about spiritual and personal transformation.

The story begins when Jesus arrives at a wedding which seems to have been partly organised by his mother. Suddenly there is a problem. The wine has run out.

That's a big problem. Because in the first century, and still in the twenty-first century, Middle Eastern weddings go on for days, and the hosts are expected to be organised, well stocked as well as generous in their hospitality.

So, with no neighbourhood supermarkets or off licences around the corner in Cana to replenish supplies, embarrassment and shame were about to descend on the organisers.

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Many years ago, I saw this happen at a country wedding in Australia. When the beer ran out, the thirsty congregation of ranchers, jackeroos and sheep shearers started booing and jeering and chanting a ribald song, whose refrain I remember to this day was: "And he's stingy with the grog!"

Apparently, there is no worse insult in the up-country Australia of Barry Humphries!

I don't suppose the reactions of the wedding guests in Cana of Galilee would have been quite so rough, but nevertheless you can see why Mary was in a bit of a panic when the wine ran out. So, she appealed to her son, Jesus, to help her in this crisis.

Jesus does not seem to have been best pleased by his mother's appeal. His reaction was:

"Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?" It sounds rather rude.

In his revered commentary on St John's Gospel, Archbishop William Temple calls the use of the word Woman 'repellent'. And even if you soften the translation to the word 'Lady', as some versions of the Bible do, this does not sound quite right either. For 'Lady' is a term rather more likely to be heard on the lips of a New York taxi driver, telling a female passenger to hurry up.

But Mary evidently persists, and so Jesus does help out by performing his first ever sign or miracle. He turns the water into wine.

Hey presto! Abracadabra! A cynic or a member of the Magic Circle might say.

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That's an understandable reaction, if you are only listening with one ear, for this can sound more like a secular conjuring trick than a miracle with a message.

To understand the deeper message, let's look at this story through the key characters in it: Jesus;

Mary, the Mother of Jesus;

The Chief Steward;

The Disciples.

Jesus appears in the story first as an attractive human character and then as a mysteriously deep spiritual communicator.

His presence as a guest at the wedding shows that he was no Puritan spoilsport or even a Methodist teetotaler.

Far from it, Jesus was a life-enhancer, who enjoyed company, parties and celebrating a marriage. He brought along his disciples too.

It is a sign that Jesus and his life and ministry were often all about joy.

Was Jesus unreasonably sharp with his mother by addressing her as 'Woman'?

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This is really a point for translators who wrestle with interpreting the obscurities of the Aramaic language. But, as we will hear in a moment, the second time in John's Gospel when Jesus addressed his mother as 'Woman' he could not have meant it more caringly or lovingly.

Certainly, at Cana, Jesus acted in a loving way towards his mother.

Even if he may have been reluctant, as he hints in the mysterious phrase "My hour has not yet come" – of which more later.

Nevertheless, he uses his miraculous power to change his hosts' plentiful supply of water into wine.

Some clever theologians – a phrase which is in this context is an oxymoron – have suggested that this is a phoney miracle, because it pleased the crowd and slaked their thirst, but had no spiritual merit. But, the clever theologians have got this one wrong. For Jesus was always intensely practical and kind in his ministry.

It could never have been said of him, as has been said of some holier than thou preachers in their ivory pulpits: "Don't be so heavenly minded that you are no earthly use."

In his earthly ministry, Jesus always healed, as well as preached. Always kind, here he was preserving the happiness of the couple's big day.

He was saving the hosts, the organisers and his own mother from massive embarrassment and even shame. And he was revealing by this early sign his generosity, his power and his glory.

Turning to the next character in the story.

Mary the Mother of Jesus, she plays a pivotal role by telling the servants:

"Do whatever he tells you".

In this story, and in everything we know about her life, Mary is the epitome of trust and obedience. If there is one phrase, one message to take away from today's Gospel it is contained in Mary's words:

"Do whatever he tells you."

When she says this she doesn't actually know what Jesus is going to do or ask. Her trust in him is absolute. Her obedience to him is total. And that is entirely in character for Mary.

When the Angel Gabriel gave her the astonishing news that she was pregnant, Mary's reply:

"Be it unto me according to thy word," demonstrated her total obedience.

When at the foot of the Cross, the dying Jesus told Mary to go to John's house with the words, surely with the gentlest of meanings:

"Woman, here is your son", Mary obeyed completely.

So, there is this holy chain of obedience running from the Annunciation, to the Wedding at Cana in Galilee, to the foot of the Cross:

It is symbolised in Mary's words: "Do whatever he tells you".

It should be our mantra too for our contemporary lives.

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The Chief Steward has a walk on part. He is the equivalent of Carson in Downton Abbey. He knows a bit about wine, does the Carson of Cana. And like many butlers he's a something of a cynic.

Oscar Wilde defined a cynic as "someone who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing."

And Carson, the cynical below stairs wine connoisseur, takes one sip of the changed wine and immediately knows that, instead of the cheap supermarket Prosecco at a tenner a bottle, he is feasting on the nectar of Moët et Chandon's finest vintage Dom Perignon Champagne at £500 a bottle.

Like many worldly people, Carson knows about money and commercial prices. He represents the multitudes who hear this story and do not understand its spiritual value.

So, what is the value of the story?

What are its signs in our lives today in January 2021?

The spiritual messages here are subtle, but powerful.

First, we have already seen the importance of spiritual obedience to Jesus from Mary's words:

"Do whatever he tells you."

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Secondly, we should notice the sign of Jesus's spiritual generosity, which is tucked away in the small print, describing the quantity as well as the quality of the wine he changed.

For if you do the maths, Jesus provided the guests with 180 gallons of superlative new wine – far in excess of what they, or even an Australian up-country wedding party, could possibly consume.

What this symbolises is the amazing abundant generosity of Jesus's grace, which he demonstrates over and over again as he pours it into the lives of those who love him.

Thirdly, we need to think about Jesus's protest to his mother:

“My hour has not yet come.”

One way of looking at this phrase here and now is to understand that Jesus's hour has not yet come into any of our lives until we open our hearts in committed, obedient surrender of our wills to His will.

There is a great painting by Holman Hunt and a powerful verse from the Book of Revelation illustrating this point.

The Holman Hunt painting, known as “*The Light of the World*”, depicts Jesus holding up a lantern and knocking at a cottage whose door has clearly been blocked for years by debris, thorns and briars undergrowth.

And, if you look closely, you see that there is surprisingly no door handle on the door. It can only be opened from the inside.

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And the verse this painting is illustrating says:

"Behold I stand at the door and knock.
If anyone hears My voice and opens the door
I will come in and eat with him and he with Me."

Or, as Jesus may have been trying to say at Cana: 'My hour can only come when people open their hearts to me.'

Finally, let's look at the last verse of our Gospel reading which says:
"Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and he revealed his glory".

But who did he actually reveal his glory to?

Not to the wedding guests, who hadn't a clue why the wine had suddenly improved! Nor to the servants, who never tasted the wine. Nor to the Chief Steward, the Carson character, who only saw the commercial, rather than the spiritual, value of the new wine.

Mary, of course, already knew about the glory of her son.

So, we are left with the disciples, who, at this early stage of Jesus's ministry, were somewhat confused about who he was. But not after this wedding. Because the final words of our Gospel reading are:

"In Cana in Galilee he revealed his glory and his disciples believed in him."

May we too see His glory and believe in Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

Amen