

I have conducted rather a lot of weddings during my ministry. Most of them have been enjoyable! As part of the preparation of the couples, I would take them through the words of the service to let them know what they will hear and what they will be asked to promise to each other before God. We would begin with the introduction to the marriage service, which includes the words, 'Our Lord Jesus Christ was himself a guest at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and through his Spirit he is with us now.' I frequently asked the couple, 'So what happened at Cana of Galilee that I am sure you would be happy if it happened at your wedding, or maybe not when you discover that all your guests have become quite drunk?' Whether or not they knew the answer, and several did not, I would read or tell them the story and explain its significance for them. It is telling us that Jesus once graced a wedding with his presence. He made a difference while he was there. He changed the situation from bad to good, from sad to joyful. So, at yours and every Christian wedding, he is the most important guest. He can make a positive difference to it. But more importantly, he can make a difference to your marriage, your future together. But, like your wedding guests, he needs an invitation. Through the Christian marriage service, you are being encouraged to invite him into your home, your life, your plans and decisions. Life will be different and better if he is part of it.

That is quite enough for a couple preparing for their wedding. But there is much more for us as Christians in this brilliant story given to us by the Gospel writer, John. The final verse of the passage suggests that its point lies beyond what appears on the surface. It is a much more than literal story. In fact, it serves as a summary of the Gospel itself and the meaning of Jesus.

But where to begin? And what to include and what to leave out in reflecting on so rich a passage? It is so deep and powerful that I always wonder if I can really do it justice in the few minutes that I have to reflect on it now. Perhaps we will start with the most interesting element in the story – the wine. Apologies to those of you who have embraced the noble discipline of abstinence, but wine is a natural, traditional, and biblical symbol of joy. It was appreciated even by that erudite but rather ascetic mediaeval Christian scholar, Thomas Aquinas, who wrote in his great theological treatise that 'if a man deliberately abstains from wine to such an extent that he does serious harm to himself, he will only have himself to blame.'

In the Bible, wine is a symbol of the longed-for joys of the future age, as expressed in many of the writings of the prophets. But by the time of Jesus, such hopes had faded.

John tells us that six stone jars were filled with water. For the people of those times, number six would suggest incompleteness, as it is one short of seven, the perfect number of completion. Those jars represent the inadequate and watered down religion of Israel at the time. Metaphorically speaking, the people, the nation, were called to be God's abundant vineyard. But now they had run out of wine. John is telling us that what Jesus has brought them is a renewal, a completeness, and a joy which nothing coming before him was able to achieve. As the Gospel will later declare, Jesus is the true vine. He is himself the new and best wine.

In him, the marriage between God and humanity has now taken place. The 'old' dispensation, that is, any religion which looks for communion with God in laws, customs, rituals and sacrifices, has been found wanting.

Through Jesus, the old has been turned into the new, the incomplete into the complete, the imperfect and life-draining into the perfect and life-giving. Or in the words of our Gospel writer: water has been turned into wine, the very best. Joy has come into the world. A fullness and abundance have been made available to us. The glory of God has appeared among human beings, not in some flash of light out of heaven but in the flesh and blood of someone like us, a real human being.'

When did all this happen? It happened on the third day, as the first words of the story tell us. It happened at Easter. As we declare in the creeds, 'On the third day he rose from the dead.' Or, following the language of our Gospel story, 'On the third day, when we realized that the water, which was all we could provide, had been changed into the blood of the grape..... because his Hour had come for his pass-over to his Father. And those who witnessed this were filled with a fullness they had never before experienced.' (*H. J. Richards, The Miracles of Jesus, p.37*)

On the third day there was a wedding. The mother of Jesus was there, probably symbolising those who had remained faithful in Israel. Jesus and his disciples were there also. And we too are with them as we share in this feast of

salvation now, this Eucharist, celebrating that through Jesus, his life, death and resurrection, God has met us, God is wedded to us and has brought us home to his life and love which is eternal. To this wedding feast all are invited. As those who have tasted the difference that Christ makes, we are called to extend that invitation in every way we can. The new wine of God's kingdom, God's life and love, is freely available for all to drink. And it will never run out.