

## **The first of the seven signs – Water into Wine**

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John 2:1-11

A phrase that occurs in one of the prayers used in church over the Christmas period is *'In this holy night heaven is come down to earth and earth is raised up to heaven'*. God coming to live in earth as a human being is bringing the life of heaven down to earth and lifting up our earthly lives to experience the life of heaven. This is clearly how Jesus sees it because at the start of John's gospel there is an encounter between him and Nathanael where he says *'I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'*

The story of Jesus, then, is the story which shows what happens when the life of heaven intersects with life on earth.

In his gospel John gives us seven clues or signs which we as readers need to follow to find the truth about Jesus. Each sign is an occasion where the life of heaven intersects with life on earth. It's an occasion where something happens that cannot be explained by the laws of nature and science. We might call it a miracle. If we follow these signs the truth will become known to us. Each sign reveals something about Jesus – who he is and what he has come to accomplish.

So in this series of reflections over the next few weeks we will be following the signs and looking for new discoveries and insights.

The first such sign is the turning of the water into wine in John chapter 2. I am sure you are familiar with the story. Jesus is at a wedding in a village called Cana (which is the home village of Nathanael – probably not just a mere coincidence). The wine runs out. This would have been more than an inconvenience – it would have meant social disgrace for the family. It could be seen as being a portent of bad luck on the bride and groom's marriage. Jesus's

mother asks Jesus to do something; he initially refuses, but then tells the servants to fill to the brim six stone jars with water. The servants are then told to take some water from the jars to the chief steward who tastes the water. It has now turned into the finest of wines and the steward expresses surprise that the best wine has been saved till later in the feast.

Many years ago I was on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and we visited the village of Cana. There was the obligatory church that had been built to mark a holy site, and also the even more obligatory gift shop. Now it has to be said that in some places in the Holy Land the gift shops were selling some genuinely attractive items – such as nativity sets carved in olive wood which were on sale around Bethlehem – but here they were selling Cana wine. And one thing's for sure – this wine was not left over from Jesus' miracle. I can say quite categorically that there is nothing special about the water in Cana that ensures fine wine.

So what is this story all about? Why is it a sign of Christ's glory? What is it telling us about who Jesus is?

The story – like the other signs which we will look at in the weeks to come – is about transformation. On the simplest of levels it is about the transformation of ordinary water into extraordinary wine. But the sign is really about the transformation that Jesus brings into life - the transformation he can bring to your life and my life. He promises in the gospel to bring life in its fullness, and the story shows what might happen if we take that promise at face value and obey him – as the servants obeyed him.

There are some interesting points of detail in the story. It's one of only two places in the gospel where Mary appears (the other is at the foot of the cross). Jesus's strange and somewhat dismissive remark to her 'My hour (or my time) has not yet come' looks forward from this moment to his death on the cross – which is referred to

throughout the gospel as Jesus's "time". This for John is the supreme moment when heaven and earth would meet. The sign points forward to his death.

The water in the jars was for Jewish purification rites and the transformation of this water into wine – and wine better than the best – was a sign that God was doing a new thing in the person of Jesus. Bringing purification not just to Israel but to the whole world. This emphasises the anticipation of Jesus' death – the sign pointing forward to what happens because of Jesus' death.

And for the miracle to occur at a wedding looks forward to the heavenly banquet, referred to in Revelation at the marriage between Christ and his faithful ones. The sign points forward to the end times.

So there is a looking forward here to the death and hence the resurrection of Jesus. A looking forward what that death and resurrection would achieve, and a looking forward to the heavenly banquet; a looking forward to what Jesus would achieve and how he would be glorified; a looking forward to the supreme moment of heaven and earth meeting.

John ends the account with the words 'Jesus did this and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him' and we will end these thoughts with these questions about how his glory can be seen in us – questions which are well worth us thinking about:

*Do we see his glory in the miracle of our transformed lives? Have we experienced his transforming power in our lives?*

*Do we see his glory in our obeying his command? Do we find a joy and a purpose in doing what he wants?*

*Do we see his glory as we celebrate his death and resurrection in the communion service? Do we see his glory revealed in his death and resurrection?*

*And perhaps most important, will we, like his disciples, believe and trust in him?*