

Isaiah 25 ⁶ *On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines.*

⁷ *On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations;*

⁸ *he will swallow up death for ever.*

The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces;

he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth.

The Lord has spoken.

⁹ *In that day they will say, 'Surely this is our God;*

we trusted in him, and he saved us.

This is the Lord, we trusted in him;

let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.'

John 2 ¹ *On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, ² and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³ When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."*

⁴ *"Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."*

⁵ *His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."*

⁶ *Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.*

⁷ *Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.*

⁸ *Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."*

They did so, ⁹ and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside ¹⁰ and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

¹¹ *What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*

As it seems lockdown is going to extend beyond 12 months from when it started last March, it is easy at times to feel sorry for ourselves and that much of the sparkle has gone out of life. Whilst we have much to be grateful for, we miss being able to see loved ones face to face, we miss hugs, we miss the daily social interaction with friends and colleagues and strangers, we miss being able to meet together for social occasions or even work. Today's story is not just about Jesus putting the sparkle back in a particular social occasion which had run into trouble, but points to a much deeper truth about the new life that Jesus came to bring.

Imagine being at that wedding at Cana. It's very hot. As is often the case with weddings, there's a lot of waiting around. And eventually the wine runs out.

Gradually there is more and more murmuring as people discover at different tables there is no more wine. People are hot and thirsty Grumbles can be heard that this shouldn't have been allowed to happen. There is agitation at the top table. It's beginning to become embarrassing. The happy atmosphere of the wedding is becoming tetchier and people getting more and more annoyed and agitated by the minute.

You see Jesus go over to see how his mother Mary is getting on. And then Mary says to a servant standing by her: "Do whatever he tells you."

You then see several servants go outside with Jesus. 10 minutes later you see a servant come back in with a jug and rather reluctantly go up to the master of ceremonies. Next moment, servants are coming in with jugs of wine, filling up people's cups. Everyone is saying it is the best wine they have ever tasted, asking where on earth it came from? Why wasn't it served up before? People are smiling and laughing – the atmosphere is transformed - full of happiness and delight, a great sense of well-

being. Soon there is wonder as well as the story goes round from table to table: this fantastic wine of which there was a seemingly endless supply, had been made by Jesus out of ordinary water!

Jesus didn't just turn the water into *any* wine – it was wonderful, delightful, *vintage* wine. And what's more 150 gallons of the stuff: 880 bottles: 73 cases!

The party which had been going completely flat, was totally reinvigorated. Everyone was delighted, filled with well-being; they felt especially blessed.

But this was not just a case of Jesus helping a host out of an embarrassing situation. John tells us, *v.11: This, the first of his miraculous signs* - a sign-post.

He thus revealed his glory i.e. something which pointed to a deeper truth about who Jesus was and what He had come to do. So, what was going on here?

When Mary spoke to Jesus, His first response is *My hour has not yet come*. Maybe He thought: *I don't want to be side-tracked into doing mere party tricks*. However, a moment's reflection – checking it out with his heavenly Father - showed Him this awkward situation could be transformed into a wonderful sign – a way of showing what the Kingdom of God is really like.

The wedding banquet which had run out of wine, with people getting increasingly thirsty and tetchy and maybe a bit cross with the bridegroom for not organizing things better, was in some ways a picture of Israel's relationship with God. It may have seemed to many that it had started so well in the glory days of King David, but now Israel's relationship with God had lost its sparkle, its delight. Religion had often become a matter of just keeping the religious laws – not only the ones in the Old Testament, but all the extra regulations introduced by the Pharisees. This was not how their relationship with God was meant to be. People were spiritually dying of thirst.

In the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament, there are two particular pictures of what the Kingdom of God is like:

First the picture of a wonderful banquet:

Isaiah 25⁶ *On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines*

Secondly of a marriage: Isaiah 62⁵ *As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.*

In the ***Song of Solomon*** these two pictures come together as a picture of

a wedding banquet. *2⁴ Let him – i.e. the bridegroom - lead me to the banquet hall, and let his banner over me be love*

Jesus obviously knew these pictures of God's kingdom very well. So it's very possible that at this wedding feast in Cana of Galilee, Jesus suddenly sees that this potentially disastrous occasion could be transformed to become a sign – a picture - of the Kingdom of God where God is married to his people and they feast on the abundance of his goodness.

Later, Jesus would talk about himself being the Bridegroom and tell stories about the Kingdom being like a wedding feast and also a place of overflowing abundance. So Jesus starts instructing the servants to fill these huge 25 or 30 gallon water jars with water. All six of them

John gives us a hint that Jesus was doing something that the old religion could not do. *six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing,*

The old religion was about trying to make yourself clean enough for God.

The trouble was most people knew that however hard they tried they could never do it. You got dirty again so quickly.

The only people who thought that they might have succeeded were the Pharisees – and as we know they were sadly mistaken. They might have had the *appearance* of being clean, holy, but God knew their hearts.

That was the old religion. Ironically - sadly, many people today still see Christianity like that old religion. They think it is something to do with us trying to make ourselves acceptable to God, clean enough for him.

But Jesus was showing he had come to do something new. He had taken water: something ordinary, tasteless and probably not very clean and turned it into something glorious and beautiful: vintage wine – something that brought joy to people's hearts and life into the community.

This is a sign of a new relationship with God, where people no longer try to make themselves pure and holy before God by trying to wash themselves clean, but where we are purified and made holy by gratefully receiving the life-giving wine of God's grace and forgiveness.

Interestingly, John's gospel is the only gospel that does not have an account of Jesus giving the disciples broken bread and poured out wine at the Last Supper, which is of course the basis of Holy Communion. Instead, John unpacks the meaning of Holy Communion with the sign in John chapter 6 where Jesus breaks bread to feed the 5000 and this first sign where Jesus turns water into wine reviving the wedding banquet in such a wonderful way.

What does this all mean for us today?

1. Realise that God is a God of abundance, generosity, and life-giving grace. *Remember 150 gallons of best vintage wine!*
2. Don't give up. If J can change that plain, rather dirty water into vintage wine. He can certainly change you! You may feel that at present, life has lost its sparkle, it's become a hard slog. You are longing to be renewed and revived.
Well, follow the example of Jesus' mother Mary: come to Jesus and look to him to help. Because now Jesus' hour *has* come*,
He has been glorified through his death on the cross and his resurrection and ascension into heaven and the new life of which the wine at Cana was a sign, has become a reality.
3. As well as following Mary's *example*, follow her *advice*:
"Do whatever He says"
The servants followed the simple step-by-step instructions of Jesus, even when they seemed a bit off the wall – just as Jesus had obeyed the prompting of the Holy Spirit.
The servants' simple obedience led to a miraculous transformation.
If *we* listen to Jesus and obey, who knows what God might do through us ?

* *Note: John refers to Jesus's "hour" 7 times in gospel.*

First 3 times – in chapter 2, 7 & 8 – Jesus's "hour has not yet come".

Later in the gospel, 3 times – in chapters 12, 13 & 17 - Jesus's "hour has come".

In the middle - John 12:27 - Jesus says: "What shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour."