

19 January 2025 John 2:1-11 The marriage at Cana.

What a lovely story! The devoted mother asks her son a favour. Something she feels sure he can help with. They're at the wedding of dear friends, maybe more guests have turned up than the groom expected. They've run out of wine. This could be a disaster! What will people think? No, really, this is serious. No, says the son, none of our business, but then he decides he will help. And it all ends happily. An everyday story of countryfolk; the kind friends stepping in to offer a subtle helping hand when its most needed.

But hardly a situation of life and death. This isn't Lazarus. This isn't blind Bartimaeus. This isn't a withered hand, healed on the sabbath. So why does John mention it? As Jesus says, it's not his time yet.

Let's have detailed look at what John does include in his gospel, and why.

At school and university, I studied languages, but the focus was on the literature. We analysed poetry, drama and prose, enjoying the story, but also searching for symbolism, metaphor and references. No doubt the writer had put those in intentionally, to cause the reader to think, to stimulate the imagination, and convey a complex and crucial message.

The Bible is indeed a collection of books, which include stories, like the parables, and the lives of individuals, Esther, for instance, or Daniel. There are historical accounts, from the life of Moses to Jesus and Paul. There are personal reminiscences of Jesus in the Gospels, and beautiful poetry. Just read David's psalms, or the Song of Songs! When John embarks on his book, he has a very clear intention. He uses his God-given gifts to convey God's message.

John 20:30-31 says, 'Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.'

A little frustrating: I want to know *all* about Jesus!

What is his intention? He wants us to believe in Christ and have life! What literary devices did he use to achieve that? Firstly, with significant numbers. Numbers are important to some of us, aren't they? Two's company, three's a crowd? Wakey, wakey, rise and shine, seven sevens are forty-nine? 24601? We will find the numbers three and seven coming up repeatedly. Both are significant in the Jewish tradition and a Jewish reader would immediately recognise their importance.

The wedding at Cana is the first of the miracles, or signs, which he recounts, one of only seven. The episode begins with 'on the third day'. On the first day, the first day of his ministry, therefore, John the Baptist spots Jesus and yells 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'

On the second day, John the Baptist identifies Jesus again. On the third day, the wedding. Three days. Another important number. An allusion to the three days from crucifixion on Good Friday to Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Mary asks Jesus for help, and he says it's not his time. What *does* he mean? Later in John's Gospel, there are references to his hour or his time: "My hour has not yet come" (2:4). The first of three declarations that his hour has not yet come. (7:30 and 8:20). Toward the end of his life, Jesus knew, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (12:23)

Six jars. Six but not yet seven. Six days God worked to create the world. The seventh is God's day. His day of rest. Jesus tells his mother that his time has not yet come. We are nearly there, but not quite. His time will be Holy Week, Good Friday. His ministry has only just begun.

Water turned into wine. Wine, a fundamental part of the celebrations: running out was not just a little problem, it was a loss of reputation, an offence against the bride's family, leading to a loss of honour and status. Jesus is being more than a helpful friend, however. This is a huge amount of wine for a great feast. More than the guests at a little country wedding could possibly consume, even over a week-long celebration!

This represents the super-abundance of everything we are promised! Wine for the great feast to which we are all invited, when the end times come, when we become reunited with God, when we are invited to a splendid feast, like a wedding feast, where the bridegroom and the bride are joined.

Symbolism is central to our communion service: wine transformed into the blood of Christ, bread his body. Another transformation.

So we have significant numbers, three and seven. Seven signs to convince us of Jesus' identity and of our salvation. We have allusions to time or hour. The sign enacted at the wedding being the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Six jars for the start of the story. Completion in due course. Three days at the thrilling, exciting beginning, three days at the terrifying, magnificent, victorious end. We have a heavenly transformation, water into wine, anticipating other transformations, man to God's son, wine to blood. We have a hidden message: that magnificent feast will be ours, in time.

Usually at this stage, I wonder what actions we should take in response to the scripture we have read. Today I have a different and joyful reaction to this first sign of John's. Let's bask in the beauty of John's literary art. Let's revel in the feeling of complicity, empathy, and belonging which John intentionally incites with his symbolism. Let's immerse ourselves in the stunning poetry of the Bible. Let's allow the deeper message of God's word to filter into our souls and infuse us with his thoughts. Let's pause our busy lives and take the time to welcome John's message of salvation.

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