

### **“Signs of the Beginning” – John 2:1-11 – Jan 17/10**

The signs are starting to sprout up like daffodils along the Stanley Park causeway, even if we are still deep in the dark of winter. “No Parking!” “No Stopping!” “No Vehicles!” “NO!” Ah yes, the signs of the beginning of the “Big Event” are appearing as if by magic all over the city. And like so many signs that attract peoples’ attention, these signs can be seen either as the harbingers of doom or as indicators of promised bliss. We won’t know until it’s all over what was the true meaning of all these signs. It’s not always easy to understand what signs are all about, but I’m sure here in Vancouver there’s an Olympic-sized fleet of tow trucks standing by to help educate the motoring public!

I wonder how widely-known the event of the wedding at Cana portrayed in John’s gospel was recognized or understood. The story of the water into wine is well-known even in today’s secular society, even if people don’t know hardly any of the details. The story may not have been well-known in John’s day – or even Jesus’ day for that matter – apparently only a few junior wine stewards knew the source of the excellent wine. After all, this event is reported only here in John’s gospel ... none of the other three even hint at it. One would suspect that an event of this magnitude and uniqueness would have been talked about a great deal, that there would have been other references to it. Who knows? Perhaps John was the only one who recognized the significance of the event, and its value in answering other questions that the faithful would ask. Questions such as “Who was this Jesus of Nazareth?”, or “Why would people like Andrew, and Peter, and Philip and Nathanael drop everything and follow him at a word?” Andrew recognized Jesus right away as the Messiah, and used that as an argument to convince his brother Simon Peter. As soon as Jesus spoke to Nathanael and told him about seeing him under the fig tree, Nathanael excitedly proclaimed Jesus as “the Son of God, the King of Israel”. We can easily understand how early church people would ask with some skepticism, “How was it that these people who otherwise seemed rational and sane would react in such a way?”

That’s what is at the heart of the Wedding in Cana miracle. It’s not so much about the miracle itself, which often seems more like some cheap magic trick performed by Jesus, as it is about revealing who Jesus is to those who already believed in him, and to those who soon would.

First and foremost we have to understand that this is a story of the power of Jesus seen in the light of his resurrection. As strange as that may seem, especially here at the beginning of the gospel, this is a resurrection story. John sets us up so he can draw that to our attention. “Then on the third day...”, he begins, and just in case we try to fit it nicely into some worldly chronology, we have to note that he identifies each of the preceding three events as being “on the next day”. John intends that our mental berries will be shaken when we hear three “on the next day’s” followed by “then on the third day”, so that we will stop and ask, “wait a minute ...”, and realize he is signaling to us with that key phrase to see this event with the echo of “on the third day he rose again” ringing loudly in our ears.

That resurrection reference is re-affirmed by John including yet another bracketing reference to “the third day” immediately after this incident, namely Jesus talking to the Pharisees about destroying the temple and in three days he would raise it up again, although John there has to add the explanation that “[Jesus] was speaking about the temple of his body”. One cannot help note the pairing of these two incidents to reflect how Jesus was received in Galilee but rejected in Jerusalem, even if that pairing causes no end of grief for those who must then resolve whether Jesus made two trips to Jerusalem or not.

In any event, the miracle at the wedding in Cana is about revealing the glory of God in Jesus, not about some magic trick. In fact, the act of the water changing to wine is not even described: there is no incantation, no special formula, no magic words of “poof! be wine!”.

Let's review the incident, and see if you agree with me. The story begins as we've already noticed with the signal, "then on the third day", and goes on to set the scene as a wedding, in Cana, in Galilee. Now I have to ask whether the early hearers of John's gospel really needed to know that Cana was in Galilee, and if so, why? In any event John paints a picture of a happy, noisy occasion. We have no idea who was getting married, what their connection was to Jesus, but we do know that his mother was there, as were the disciples he had recently picked up along the way – fairly recently, in the last few days as it were.

Many people are shocked, or at the very least troubled, by Jesus' response to his mother when she informed him the wine had run out. We can only speculate as to why she felt the need to tell him about it – was she looking for a miracle or for him to go fetch some? Perhaps she felt he and his friends could leave and take the pressure off the host. Whatever her motivation, his answer to her shocks us: "What's that to me?" he asks, and we are aghast. What decent son would talk to his mother in such a way? John gives us another signal as to what's happening here, as he quotes Jesus as continuing, "my hour has not yet come", a theme that repeats often throughout this gospel. (Some examples: When his brothers urged him to go up to Jerusalem, he said it was not his hour, but then went. He also delayed two days before responding to Martha and Mary's plea about their brother's illness.)

However, Jesus' mother's response gives this story, to me at least, a huge stamp of authenticity. In the manner of the archetypal Jewish mother, she ignores him and speaks instead to the servants: "do what he tells you!"

Being good servants, they do just that, and at Jesus' command fill up the six jars with water. I did the math on this, and six jars at 20-30 gallons each (I'm assuming U.S. gallons here, not the larger Imperial gallons) works out to something like 120 to 180 gallons of water. Since 6 gallons yields thirty 750ml bottles, that means that once the water turned into wine they had between 600 and 900 bottles of the finest wine on hand, or some 50 to 75 cases of twelve. The weight of the wine, not including the jars, works out to almost 1800 lbs, or just under one ton! Even allowing for some exaggeration as the story was told and retold before it got to John's ears, I think we get the point, that this was no sleight-of-hand trick, that Jesus didn't pull a bottle or two out of his robes and slip it in. Nor was it that wine was poured into the water, resulting in a weak and diluted mixture. There is to be no mistake – there was no other possibility except that water went in and wine came out – the very finest of wine.

But this was no magic trick either, with incantations, spells, tap-the-side-of-the-jar-three-times rituals, or other hocus-pocus. This was the power of the creator, the one who wrote the laws of physics and chemistry at work in Jesus. This was the one whom John identified as being the Word from the very beginning causing it to be with a word: "fill them with water, now draw the wine out".

Nor was it some kind of sideshow, some kind of circus event with the crowds going wild as a burst of fireworks and mylar snow signaling the success of the trick. The servants knew where they got the wine, but the chief steward didn't, nor did the host. I'd love to have seen the resulting confusion after the chief steward congratulated the host on the quality of the wine – "Did you arrange for this? No, didn't you? Then who did?"

Who did, indeed. Jesus did it, and the disciples witnessed it and came to believe in him, and that was the point of the whole incident. The men whom Jesus had swept up with his call to "come, follow me", who would become his followers, his disciples, and who would later be sent by him to proclaim the good news, they believed in him. They did not, they could not, begin to fully understand, but they saw enough to know that this was no magic trick, that God was clearly at work in Jesus in a new and unique and powerful and exciting way. They would not, could not understand until that other

fateful third day that this Jesus was Messiah, Son of God, King of Israel, saviour in a way that none other had been, or ever would be.

We know how the disciples were affected by this event. This was one of the key signs of the beginning of his path to the cross, and to the resurrection three days later. Those disciples continued to follow Jesus, and to proclaim him as Messiah, especially after the ultimate momentous 'third day'. They continued to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God, the Christ whose death and resurrection confirmed the power of God's saving grace in him, to proclaim that Jesus had provided through his broken body enough wine to fill all the cups of the new covenant forever.

And that's where this story touches us, and the world we live in. Once again we are reminded of God's holy power at work in Christ Jesus, and how his promise of continuing to support us through the Holy Spirit are sealed in his miraculous power. We cannot explain the workings of that power any more than the servants could explain what had happened with the water, but we can, like the disciples who watched it happen, believe in his power.

Not every miracle for which we pray will happen in the way we want or when we expect, but we too, like the disciples present at that wedding reception, can and do witness to his power, and to God's glory made apparent in him. We too are witnesses who watch his power change our lives and the lives of others for good, and for the glory of God. This is not magic, this is the power of Christ, the sign of the beginning of a new era, a new relationship with God, a new life.