**New wine. January 16 2021 John 2:1-12**

Cinderella, My Fair Lady, Beauty and the Beast, Shrek,

Many famous movies and stories revolve around an amazing transformation in a key character. The popularity of “make over” shows on lifestyle channels also reinforces this. The classic setting for transforming ordinariness into great elegance is of course a wedding.

Traditionally most cultures seem to put strong emphasis on the celebration of a marriage. It is an occasion of great joy and encompasses significant hope for a bright future ahead for the couple. This is a time when many display a measure of extravagance that they may never have expressed previously.

This wedding in Cana, in the early days of Jesus ministry, bears these characteristics. Jesus part in the story is an interesting one. It is an extraordinary miracle in many ways. Other miracle stories respond to desperate or at least very significant human need often related to health, safety, hunger, liberation or even life itself. This seems to be an anomaly. Water into wine, a lack of wine at a wedding, it seems far more trivial, or even indulgent.

We are given minimal details about the wedding, there is no reference to why Jesus was there or who the couple were. However the story changes markedly after Jesus becomes aware of their need for more wine. At this point elaborate details are given, so the reader’s attention would be drawn to this as the focal point of the story.

The focus is on the six huge water jars, used for the Jewish rites of purification. The size and number of jars is excessive even for an elaborate wedding feast. We are even told of their capacity 500-725 litres, and that they were filled to the brim at Jesus command. This sets the scene for something of grand proportions to take place. Then the focus shifts to the amazing quality of the wine, and in these vast jars, the vast quantity of superb wine which Jesus provided.

Wine was a common beverage in New Testament times. Grape growing was a common practice in Palestine. Therefore, unsurprisingly vineyards, vines and wine feature prominently in Jesus stories, teachings and statements.[[1]](#footnote-1) Wine was common with meals and particularly expected in times of feasting and celebration. We can also expect that people were discerning wine drinkers, the elite, in particular, would easily distinguish good wine from more common wine.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Hebrew Scriptures speak of an abundance of wine characterising the time when God’s new age comes about.[[3]](#footnote-3) This encourages us to see far more in the story in John 2, to see that this story points to the inauguration of God’s new age, God’s kingdom is beginning to be revealed. God’s promised salvation is coming.

There is no hint here that this miracle became widely known by those present at the wedding. The servants knew, Jesus mother and the disciples knew, but from what we read, the rest of the gathering may have purely shared the understanding of the steward, that the host had brought out an abundance of the best wine towards the end of the celebration. The focus of the story in the context of John’s gospel is not on its ongoing impact, or on its effect of the wider population. We read that the disciples believed in him in response to this miracle[[4]](#footnote-4) but there is no indication that this miracle caused any other people to follow Jesus or to believe in Him. The focus of this miracle is on what it reveals about Jesus and what he was doing here on earth.

John’s gospel speaks often of who Jesus is and uses a wide range of imagery in that process. Readers learn about Jesus as *“the bread of life”, “the light of the world”, “the way, the truth, the life”, “the resurrection”, “the vine”* and the source of *“living water”.* The imagery always links to what Jesus is offering to those who follow him. In this passage we see an enacting of who Jesus is, what he is like and what he has come to do.

We see Jesus acting with authority such that the servants obey his commands, yet he doesn’t seek attention, the miracle quite possibly goes unnoticed by many present. So in pointing to the Kingdom which Jesus has come to inaugurate it also points to His rightful place of authority in this kingdom and to His consistent humility. In the servants having a role in the miracle it can remind us of Jesus calling his followers and now us into a process of working with him in the work of His kingdom.

The story shows us Jesus offering an immense, unmerited gift to those at the wedding, an abundance of superb wine, something which should provoke and enable great joy and celebration. The abundance of this gift is really the central focus of this miracle. “Jesus begins his ministry with a vivid enactment of the gift he has to offer.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Throughout the gospel there is often extravagance associated with the acts of Jesus, an abundance of bread and fish, (John 6:13 and 21:11) and extravagant anointing oils (12:3-5; 19:39)[[6]](#footnote-6) In his teachings he offers an abundance of gifts, *rivers of living water,(*4:14; 7:38) fullness of life, (10:10) grace upon grace (1:16).

The good news of Jesus is good news of unconditional grace and generosity. When Jesus gives life he gives it abundantly, far beyond all need or expectation far above all need or expectation. “Jesus ministry begins with an extraordinary act of grace, a first glimpse of the “greater things” to come.” (1:50)[[7]](#footnote-7)

The use of the jars for the purification rites, points to the reality that Jesus will offer a better purification with the new wine of the new covenant.[[8]](#footnote-8) The miracle occurs in these empty vessels, so there is both a sense of continuity and newness in the symbolism of the story. The faith of Israel is potentially being transformed; the old rites of purification are being re-shaped through Jesus’ activity. The jars which were empty are being filled and transformed.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In this abundant gift of wine the disciples see something more of Jesus glory. They begin to recognise Jesus as the one who was bringing God to them. Their understandings are beginning to be reshaped. The miracle breaks the boundaries of the disciples’ world but they are willing to see in this the inbreaking of God.[[10]](#footnote-10)

*Can God break into our worlds?* Are we *open to the unusual places* where *Jesus may be found*?

**What does it mean for us?**

We can see that those who really saw this miracle were those who were close to Jesus. They watched what he was doing, they listened to him, they did what he asked, they stayed close.

We are invited to draw close to Jesus. To share in the wonder of the miracle, join in the celebration of Jesus gift of life in all its fullness.

We are encouraged to accept the generosity of God - the lavish gift of Jesus, and the transformation that he alone can bring. The story reminds us of the abundant extravagance of God’s grace towards us. It reminds us of the vast scope of God’s gifts and blessings to us. As Paul said to the Ephesians God has *“blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*”[[11]](#footnote-11) this is the new wine of the kingdom, there for us to enjoy.

“The essence of any miracle is that it shatters conventional explanations and expectations”.[[12]](#footnote-12) It challenges us to be open to God doing a new thing.

The transformation of water to wine points to the concept of transformation and the transformations that Jesus will bring about through his life, death and resurrection, and through the ongoing transformative action of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Jesus followers.

Empty jars can be filled. Jesus can use something very ordinary and make something amazing! Jesus can do something new, something which blows all our expectations out of the water.

1. James J. Freeman, *Manners and Customs of the Bible,* (Springdale, Pasadena: Whitaker House Publishing, 1996) 181-182 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Simon Jones, *The World of the Early Church,* (Oxford, England: Lion Hudson Publishing, 2011) 58, 76-78 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Amos 9:13; Joel 3:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John 2:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gail R. O’Day, “The gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” In Leander E. Keck et al. Ed. *The New interpreters Bible: A commentary in Twelve Volumes,* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1995) 536 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2010) 149 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. O’Day, “The gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections, 540 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Michaels, *The Gospel of John,* 148 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. O’Day, “The gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” 538 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. O’Day, “The gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” 540 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Eph 1:3 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. O’Day, “The gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” 539 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)