

21st January, Wedding at Cana Sermon

+ In a few months' time four people who are great friends of Bristol Cathedral will be ordained deacon: our placement ordinands Alison Walker and Rob Denton – Alison is sub deacon today – Bob Latham, formerly a head server and involved in many aspects of our life and Louisa Pittman, until recently a verger. We're delighted that they've all been offered training parishes and you'll find the details of where they'll be serving on the literature table. A deacon's primary role is to serve – to serve God and to serve the priest and congregation with whom they work. The word for deacon in Greek, *diakonos*, is derived from the word 'servant'.

At my ordination to the diaconate my wonderful but rather scary training incumbent gave me a daily prayer book as a gift, which had an inscription in Greek inside the front cover. Rather ominously I thought at the time, the inscription read: *Do whatever he tells you*. It all became clear when my incumbent's wife reminded him to fill in the Biblical reference of his inscription, which was of course John 2 verse 5, part of the passage we've just heard. The words, *Do whatever he tells you*, were the Blessed Virgin Mary's instructions to those who were serving at the Wedding at Cana. Jesus was about to perform his first miracle and in preparation the servants were asked to fill six huge stone water-jars with water.

The words *Do whatever he tells you* in the front of my prayer book were particularly relevant for a new deacon, because at every Eucharist it's the deacon who prepares the water and the wine on the altar, in readiness for a priest to pray the prayer of consecration. They do the same preparation as the servants in Cana did, all those years ago. Then at our Eucharists, during the prayer of consecration, in the power of the Spirit, the ordinary becomes extraordinary. Ordinary wine, symbolically laced with the water that gushed from the dead Christ's pierced side, and ordinary unleavened bread, take on the property of Christ's body and his blood. How this happens is a mystery – to say Amen as we receive Christ's body and his blood is a true leap of faith. But we believe that in some mysterious way, as we share in his body and blood we become one with Christ, united with him and with one another as one body. Which is why the Eucharist is described as a marriage between God and his people, Christ and the Church. The wedding supper. The heavenly banquet at which the ordinary – bread, wine and all of us – are transformed, becoming extraordinary.

For obvious reasons, today's Gospel passage, the wedding at Cana, is a popular reading at weddings. It isn't a complicated parable, it's a good story and it emphasises Jesus' humanity in a way we can identify with. In the 21st century, post-industrial chilly north we sometimes struggle with figs, vineyards, mustard seeds and even sheep. But we all know about weddings and it's rather reassuring to know that Jesus went to a wedding. He presumably had friends who invited him. He was with people as they enjoyed themselves, eating, drinking, dancing. Like most of us on occasion, Jesus was even a bit short with his mother. When she tried to tell him what to do – 'Jesus they have no wine', he snapped back 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' But his mother seems to have known better, saying those words to the servants, *Do whatever he tells you*.

The miracle at the wedding at Cana is traditionally linked with the Epiphany and Christ's Baptism, because in all three of these Biblical accounts Christ's glory is revealed for the first time in a particular way. When the wise men visit at Epiphany, the infant Jesus' divinity is recognised in their symbolic gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Furthermore, as gentiles for the first time they represented the astounding truth that this child was to be Saviour of the entire world – Jews and gentiles. Fast forward thirty or so years and at Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan we witness the Trinity for the first time. When Jesus emerges from the water a dove – symbolising the Holy Spirit – hovers above his head and God's voice is heard from heaven, 'this is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased!' Then the wedding at Cana sees Jesus' first miracle as he changes water into wine, and from then on his ministry has really begun, everything is about to change.

It's frustrating that we have very little idea where Cana was. Today pilgrims to the Holy Land are often taken to where it might have been and Jeffrey John, the Dean of St Albans, writes about the time he took a party of pilgrims there and invited the married couples to renew their wedding vows. He writes:

In the church at Cana we did what pilgrims regularly do: the married couples in the party gathered around the altar, joined hands and renewed their wedding vows, after which I repeated the marriage blessing over them. It was a moving

occasion, very significant for all those who took part. But I didn't realize how painful it would be for a considerable number of people in the party who were unable to join in: those who were bereaved of their partners, those who had never been partnered, those who were lonely in their singleness, those whose partnerships are not officially sanctioned by the Church. After the service I was horrified to discover how many of the group had been in tears in the shadows at the back, while the married people – symbolically standing in the light around the altar – had been celebrating their joy.

Jeffrey John goes on to say: maybe we shouldn't have done it, not only because it caused too much pain to exclude so many people, but also because the miracle of Cana has almost nothing to do with marriage in the normal sense anyway.

If we're to uncover what the miracle at Cana is saying, we should disregard the wedding aspect of the story and look instead at the focal point: the changing of water into wine.

We're told that the wine had run out – terrible for the hosts at any event and in this miracle symbolising that time had run out for the old covenant that God had with his people. We're also told that the wine the wedding guests had been drinking up to then had been inferior, the old covenant it represented had become less than perfect. But God hadn't abandoned his people and the ordinary stone jars full of water were transformed into the extraordinary, stone jars full of the very best wine. This excellent wine points to the New Covenant being superior to everything that had gone before. More than that, the amount of water turned into wine was unbelievable. It was gallons and gallons and gallons. Far more than the guests at any wedding could consume. Sensitive souls taking the miracle literally have occasionally been offended by this superabundance of wine. But this is to miss the point, which is that the amount of wine and its quality symbolise God's relationship with and love for us, his people. The vast quantity of wine shows us that God's love through the New Covenant will never run out, there's more than enough to go round. This wine of the New Covenant serves to illustrate a present and future stability too. In contrast to the nomadic existence of the Jewish fathers such as Abraham and Moses, who couldn't cultivate vines because they weren't in one place for long enough, we of the new covenant believe that Christ will come again and the wine won't run out before he does.

So as we share in the bread and wine of the Eucharist we become one body. Heaven and earth past and present are united through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. We celebrate the Eucharist week by week and it's easy to overlook the significance of becoming one body with Christ – the transformation of we who are ordinary human beings into the potentially extraordinary. The bread and wine of the New Covenant are for every baptised Christian who gathers around the altar, and no-one is ever excluded, which is why Jeffrey John ends his account of renewing marriage vows in Cana by saying: *It might have made more sense to celebrate the Eucharist, since that would have been far truer to what Cana is really about.*

Like the servants at Cana, the deacon's job at the Eucharist is to assist, making things ready in preparation for the Eucharistic transformation. But the Blessed Virgin Mary's instructions to the servants at Cana were for all of us. As people of the New Covenant we are all called to transform the world, to strive to make the ordinary extraordinary, and we will achieve this transformation if we heed the words: *Do whatever he tells you.* Amen.