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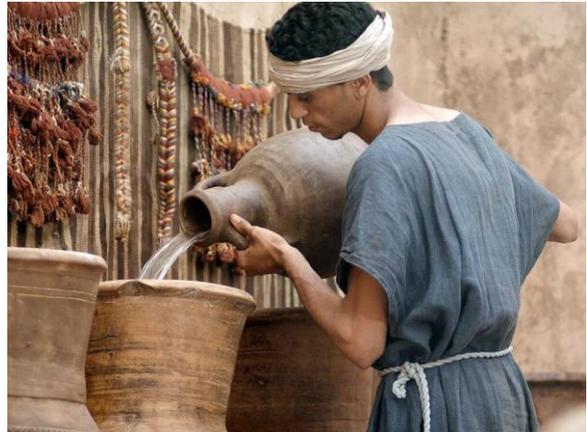
Dear Friends,

***On the third day
there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee (John 1.1-11)***

Ten months ago when this series of letters began and we had just been plunged into lockdown, I wrote to many of you for the first time expressing our family heartbreak as Wengen, the ski resort where the celebration of Jack our second son's marriage was to take place only a few days later, was closed. Days later we joined other nations in locking down and weeks later our third son Peter complained, tongue in cheek, that the Church in Wales had cancelled his summer wedding. Each of them has rescheduled their weddings several times since then. Jack and Georgie sent out a message cancelling the new date of their celebration in March 2021 only days ago and Peter and Lauren are hoping and longing for their fourth wedding date in June to be made possible, but all of us know that if it does it will not be the wedding they originally dreamed of.

Virtually every week since last March couples whose marriages were arranged have contacted me asking whether their wedding can take place in church or asking me to fix or hold other dates for them. Their sadness and frustration is just one part of the anguish of those who grieve a love lost this past year. As I hold all these young couples in my heart I think too of those separated from their loved ones, especially the senior members of our congregation whose beloved is in hospital or living in a care home and from whom they are separated. As the clock ticks, the pain of separation grows. Many have not celebrated significant moments together, each longs to touch and hold and feel and kiss and be with their beloved. It is heartbreaking. Others have known their loved ones are sick or dying and been deprived final moments together. Some of us now mourn the loss of the love of their life alone at home. Each one of us has been affected by Covid and it is impossible to measure the suffering that surrounds us. But we feel it and, as time passes, we oscillate between feelings of despair and moments of hope as the vaccination programme begins to raise our hopes for the future.

It is so tempting to imagine that the gospel reading for tomorrow, the first sign or Epiphany of God's complete presence here on earth in human life in John's Gospel, is just the story of a wedding celebration that nearly went badly wrong. It was tempting to insert much loved wedding hymns into the Power Point slides for tomorrow's Zoom service and it's tempting to just imagine the shame of the groom discovering a shortage of wine at the celebration of his nuptials, but you and I know that John is speaking about a truth beyond embarrassment or sadness at the launch of a couple's marriage when he tells the story of a wedding at Cana.



You and I know that in the Hebrew bible and in Jewish scripture and literature the wedding feast symbol is used to express the Messianic Days. The prophets often speak about God's people Israel's unfaithfulness as adultery and promiscuity, and promise that one day in the future God will "marry" his people in an unbroken relationship. It's no wonder we have lots of stories about weddings in our gospels - the wise and foolish virgins, the king who gives a wedding feast and nobody shows up, the master who returns from a wedding banquet to find some of his servants unprepared and the story of those who want the best places at the table. In this same Johannine tradition in the book of Revelation heaven is portrayed as the wedding feast of the Lamb, that is the union of our Lord and his Church. In each of these stories the wedding is a parable or a symbol of the kingdom of God.

Although the story of "The Wedding at Cana" feels like a simple miracle story, we should think of it within this tradition. In John's Gospel this is the first of Jesus' signs: it is an Epiphany account showing us the true identity of Jesus. This story perhaps more than any other in scripture is filled with lots of little signs. It begins like this. "*On the third day*". Need I flesh that out? No, you know what happens on the third day. And this first clue tells you this is an "eschatological" story for it concerns our true and eternal destiny. The story is all about the new covenant, marriage, relationship between God and his people. Whilst on the surface it seems the story is about water being replaced with wine, it is really speaking about the old covenant and the new life of The Spirit. You know that in Matthew, Mark and Luke, new wine expresses the new life in the new kingdom and this new wine will not fit into the old wine skins ...it will burst them as in Mark's gospel. The water pots in John's wedding story produce more than is needed...120 gallons. Just like in the feeding of the five thousand this is symbolism. In the Hebrew bible, the prophets often speak of the last days in terms of overflowing wine. John crafts his story carefully. There are six large water pots, there for the ritual foot washing. In rabbinic numerology perfection is expressed by the number seven - and the number six expresses the falling short of perfection. So when the wine overflows we know the Spirit cannot be contained in books of law and teaching or even in one life.

The symbolism of this story goes beyond the images of the banquet. Think back to the Hebrew bible's Wisdom, the female figure who personifies God's actions and relationship with us but who is also identified as God's Spirit. John, in the opening words of his gospel, describes Jesus as the Word incarnate. In Greek Hellenistic and literature and also in the story's of God's people in the Hebrew bible, God's Wisdom or Word is expressed as bread or wine...think of those who are fed in the wilderness, think of the five thousand and the long narrative about the Bread of Life in John's Gospel. John's Jesus is both Wisdom and Word once known to God's own people as bread and wine. Now do you see this story is about the true bread and the true wine who comes to us in resurrection moments on the third day and seated around a table? There will always be enough of this love, this life, this Spirit to go round.

John may also be representing the myth of the Greek God Dionysius. The original readers of our story would have known that this god of the grape harvest could also turn water into wine and some might have visited shrines dedicated to Dionysius. Even Philo of Alexandria who tried to harmonise Greek philosophy with the Torah, or God's law, said "*it is the Word of God which will truly bring forth wine instead of water, and give your souls to drink with a divine intoxication*".

Or, as my close friend Chris said earlier this week when we reminisced over our pilgrim journeys to Cana, "*A drop of water given by Jesus and shared with Him is finer than the best champagne.*"

When our lives are overwhelmed by sadness it is hard to see God's life spilling out and overflowing in our midst. Yet day after day stories emerge that speak of God's wine being poured out by the gallon. The devotion and the risk taking, the exhaustion and the courage, the commitment and the heartache borne by doctors, nurses and front line workers are all symbols of God's resurrection life. Each one is a retelling of John's gospel. On the third day a wedding took place in Cana in Galilee, in The Heath in Cardiff and in hospitals and care homes around the world. Thank God that, even now, we are seeing the Messianic Wedding Feast to which we are all invited.

Yours with love in Christ,

Vicki

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