

Philippians 4:6-9 John 2:1-11

Here we have the first recorded miracle as performed by Jesus. That in itself makes it interesting, but it is interesting on more levels than just that. First, let's set the scene.

Jewish weddings at that time were occasions to be enjoyed by the whole village, and the festivities invariably lasted for a few days. A couple of points to observe on this particular occasion. Firstly, Mary and Jesus must have had quite close connections to the family of the bride. After all, it was Mary who noticed that the wine was about to run out and then told the servants to do whatever Jesus told them to do. *'His mother told the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."*' John 2:5. That in itself tells us two things. Mary obviously had some authority with the servants and also she had complete confidence that Jesus was able to rectify the situation.

I find that very interesting. She knew what he was capable of and yet his ministry was yet to get off the ground. At that point, as far as we know, Jesus had yet to perform any of his miracles which were to become a feature of his ministry.

The second very important point to make here is that running out of wine would be a social disaster of the highest order for the wedding host. Hospitality was very much part of the culture of those days and wine was an integral part of that hospitality. Running out of wine would be a black mark against the name and reputation of the host, a stain that would take a long time to erase. This is important when we analyse the messages that can be taken from this experience.

The jars of water that feature in this story were used for washing. When anyone entered a home, the first thing they always did was to wash their feet, a task usually carried out by a servant. And then there was the ritual of washing both before a meal and even between courses. Because the festivities were well advanced, these jars would have been close to empty, which is why Jesus tells the servants to fill them up.

So what messages can we take from this story? You might remember that two weeks ago I made the point that John's purpose in his gospel is to make a statement about just who Jesus is – the Messiah. So here we have Jesus, right at the beginning of his ministry, making a very strong statement about just what he is capable of – taking something as common and ordinary as water and turning it into something special.

This is emphasised by what the master of ceremonies says to the bridegroom, *'A host always serves the best wine first. Then, when everyone has had a lot to drink, he brings out the less expensive wine. But you have kept the best until now!'* John 2:10. This is a metaphor for what Jesus can do with our lives – take our rather ordinary lives and do something special with them. He can transform us, but we do need to take heed of Mary's words to the servants, *'Do whatever he tells you.'* John 2:5. Only by taking on board the words of Jesus can we ever hope to change for the better.

So in many ways, this occasion, this story serves as a signpost for the three years of ministry that lie ahead for Jesus. It is a sign of the power and glory of God; it is a sign of the majesty of Jesus, it is a sign of the kindness and compassion of Jesus – his miraculous act saved the wedding host from shame and embarrassment; it is a sign of the grace of Jesus and there is more than enough for everyone (six large pots of wine is a lot of wine); it is a sign that life with Christ is not dull and flat, but is life-giving and joyful. Unfortunately, this point is often lost on Christians and non-Christians alike!

I want to make this point. These signs are a reflection of the priorities for Jesus. Life is all about making decisions as to what we should do and should not do, and these decisions are shaped by our priorities, which in turn are shaped by our values and our belief. It is so important that we recognise and identify those things that are meaningful and primary, and that we attend to those things before the not so important pursuits and interests.

There is the story of the philosophy professor who stood before his class with some items on the table in front of him. When the class began, he picked up a large, empty jar and proceeded to fill it with small rocks. He then asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed that it was.

The professor then picked up a small box of pebbles and poured them into the jar. He shook the jar lightly. The pebbles, of course, rolled into the gaps between the rocks. He then asked the students again if the jar was full. They agreed it was.

The professor picked up a box of sand and poured it into the jar. Of course, the sand filled up the remaining gaps in the jar. He then asked once more if the jar was full. The students replied with a unanimous 'Yes.'

'Now,' said the professor, 'I want you to recognise that this jar represents your life. The rocks are the important things – your family, your health, your faith – things that if everything else was lost and only they remained, your life would still be full. The pebbles are the other things that matter – like your job, your house, your car. The sand is everything else, the small stuff. If you put the sand in the jar first, there is no room for the pebbles or the rocks. The same goes for your life. If you spend all your time and energy on the small stuff, you will never have room for the things that are important to you. You will never have time for your priorities. Take care of the rocks first – they are your priorities. The rest is just sand.'

As people of faith, we have a guide as to what the shape and nature of those priorities should be. In our first reading, Paul tells us to, '*Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honourable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable.*' Philippians 4:8. Ezra Taft Benson, American politician and religious leader, wrote, '*When we put God first, all other things fall into their proper place or drop out of our lives.*'

We will have our ups and downs this year, there is nothing surer. But my hope and prayer is that at the end of the year we can look back on the decisions we have made, which will be based on our priorities, which in turn will be based on our faith, and we will have no regrets.

I finish by making one last point. Sometimes, it is not that easy to make that decision which we know is the right one but there is a degree of sacrifice involved, and that can take a little courage. Don't be like the young police officer who was taking his final exam at a police college in London. Here is one of the questions.

You are on patrol in outer London when an explosion occurs in a gas main in a nearby street. On investigation you find that a large hole has been blown in the footpath and there is an overturned car lying nearby. Inside the car there is a strong smell of alcohol. Both occupants, a man and a woman are injured. You recognise the woman as the wife of your Divisional Inspector, who is at present away in the USA. A passing motorist stops to offer you assistance and you realise he is a man who is wanted for armed robbery.

Suddenly, a man runs out of a nearby house, shouting that his wife is expecting a baby and that the shock of the explosion has made the birth imminent. Another man is crying for help, having been blown into an adjacent canal by the explosion, and he can't swim.

Bearing in mind the provisions of the Mental Health Act, describe in a few words what actions you would take. The officer thought for a moment, picked up his pen, and wrote, 'I would take off my uniform and mingle with the crowd.'

Sometimes, it is easier to just mingle with the crowd. We must do what we know is right; stand up for what we know is right. The last word goes to Paul, '*Don't copy the behaviour and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.*' Romans 12:2.