

## The Wedding in Cana

I am always interested in reading people's anecdotes and remember reading a collection of anecdotes of Bishop Eric Treacy. He was Bishop of Wakefield in the late 1960's and early 1970s and was a famous railway photographer with over 12000 of his photos in the archives of the National Railway Museum in York. On one occasion, while still bishop, he was due to go into hospital and a woman, who was attending a Diocesan Meeting, expressed concern for the Bishop and hoped it was 'nothing very serious'. He tried to reassure her: 'Oh no its nothing very much,' he said, 'just haemorrhoids actually.' 'You poor man,' replied the woman, 'all that speaking you have to do and having a sore throat all the time.' The Bishop smiled gently, but later confessed to a friend, 'You know she might be right. Medical science is so advanced these days that they may well tackle the problem from that end!'

Looking at today's gospel story is very definitely one that can be tackled from a number of different ends! In John's Gospel there is so much richness of detail that we are left with a problem. Where do we start? Which end do we choose? There is a surface story that we can relate to easily but then there is always so much more with a deeper meaning for anyone eager, energetic and committed enough to find out and understand. The wedding in Cana is no exception. On the surface this is a simple village wedding. Yet at the end of the story John tells us that this wedding was the first of Jesus' signs. He uses the word sign to tell us that this was a first sign (or clue) of Jesus' glory, a sign in which the disciples believed. John writes his gospel building a series of signs, encouraging us to use our imagination, intuition and initiative to follow them to the very end.

I have quoted this story before but it is still seen, with major survey statistics to support it, as one of the funniest jokes in the world! Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson decide to go on a camping trip. After dinner and a bottle of wine, they lay down for the night, and go to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes awoke and nudged his faithful friend. "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see." Watson replied, "I see millions of stars." "What does that tell you?" Watson thought for a minute.

"Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets."

"Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo."

"Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three."

"Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful and that we are small and insignificant."

"Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow."

"What does it tell you, Holmes?"

Holmes was silent for a while, then spoke: "Watson, you idiot. Someone has stolen our tent!"

It's interesting as the story highlights a reversal of roles. Watson is trying to be 'Holmes-like' analysing the minute details of the situation to come up with an answer from a number of different angles or ends and Holmes, uncharacteristically gets to the point straight away. It is usually Watson that can be relied upon to say the obvious and simplest of comments. That was not Sherlock Holmes' usual technique. My interest in the adventures of Sherlock

Holmes is based, very much, on his complex search for clues. It is the way that he builds up one of his famous cases, such as the Hound of the Baskervilles or A Study in Scarlet, by piecing together sometimes big but often seemingly small and insignificant clues to solve the crime. He follows the clues, one by one, to get to the end.

The scene, in our story, is a simple wedding feast. In Palestine a wedding was a notable occasion lasting a week but this was no special wedding; Cana was no special place. It was a long way from the centre of the Roman Empire in time and space. Jesus' public ministry began in a very obscure place. But it was a big event locally and the wedding feast was an opportunity for joyful feasting. It was the responsibility of the groom's family to feed the guests and provide the wine to make the guests merry. Jesus was there with his five disciples and it was very much a happy time, one in which, I am sure, Jesus would have gladly shared. The ability of the groom's family to provide the wedding feast for their own village and the bride's village was seen as proof that the groom could provide for his new bride. Wine was an essential ingredient of the occasion; so when the wine runs out during the feast it is more than a minor inconvenience. It was a humiliating crisis, a social disaster.

Mary, Jesus' mother was there too. She seemed to take control of the situation by telling Jesus of the crisis. On the face of it Jesus' reply seemed a bit rude: "Woman, what is that to me?" And why didn't he call her mother? His reply makes it sound as though Jesus is unconcerned about the social crisis looming and the shame it would bring upon the groom's family house. But Mary was confident that he would do something and she tells the servants to do exactly what he told them. He did do something. At the door were six big water jars. Jesus commanded them to fill six stone water pots. Together, this would have been in excess of 455 litres or 100 gallons of water. He told the chief steward to draw some from the pots and bring it to the master of ceremonies to taste. The master was amazed at the quality of the wine and calls the groom saying, in effect, 'most people serve the good wine first and then, when the guests have drunk a great deal and their palates are such that they are not in much of a condition to appreciate what they are drinking, they serve the inferior wine; you have kept the best until last. A miracle yes, but in an ordinary location and surroundings of family joy and celebrations. It was here Jesus started his public ministry and where the disciples and all his followers first caught a glimpse of who he really was.

In true Sherlock Holmes' fashion, how good are you in identifying the clues of this simple story? What do you take away from the story? William Barclay, in his commentary, focuses on three things: when, where and why it happened. The event was a joyful one. Jesus would have been very comfortable at such an occasion. He loved to share in happy events and this was a joyful celebration. It was a great occasion but at an ordinary home of an ordinary family, in ordinary Cana. No vast crowds, just family and friends. It was at home! It was in a humble home that Jesus started his ministry and first showed his glory. And throughout his ministry he was to show that home, to him, was a place for which nothing but the absolute best was good enough. So why did it happen? It would have been a disaster if the wine had run out that day. It was to save a family from shame and disgrace that Jesus used his power. It was in sympathy, in compassion and kindness, in understanding for an ordinary family that Jesus acted. Many people can do the big thing on the big occasion but Jesus did the big thing on a simple and small occasion.

These are real signs or clues about Jesus' future ministry. What John is telling us in this story is that Jesus did NOT do something once and never again, but that he did something which he is forever doing; he did at the start, at the wedding, he continued through his ministry and he continues to do now. John, at the start of his gospel, is saying that the Cana wedding story DOES NOT convey things that Jesus did in Palestine around 2000 years ago but of things he is doing today. Jesus, on one day, at a wedding feast prevented the humiliation of a Galilean family by turning six jars of water into wine, wine of a quality never tasted before. But John says that, whenever Jesus comes into anyone's life, there will be a new quality of life like turning water into wine. And not any old cheap wine but wine of amazing quality.

Barclay quotes Sir Wilfred Greenfell who said, when appealing for volunteers for his expeditions to Labrador in Canada, that he could not promise them much money but he could promise them the time of their lives. John was writing his gospel 70 years after Jesus was crucified and for those 70 years he had thought about, meditated on and remembered until he saw meanings and significances that he had not seen at the time. When John told this story he was remembering what life was like with Jesus and he was saying: 'wherever Jesus went and whenever he came into anyone's life it was like turning water into wine. In this same way, God provides his grace on us who believe. We deserve nothing but are lavishly provided for so we might share this joy and love with others. The quantity of the wine was more than the entire village could drink in the feast, many times over. The quality of the new wine was amazing. Jesus came, as John says later in Chapter 10:10, that we might have life – but life in all its fullness, or to put it another way, we might have the time of our lives. It might well be worth us taking an opportunity and time to pray through this story complete with our own failures and disappointments in mind remembering that transformation only came, at the wedding, when someone actually took Mary's words seriously; 'Do whatever my son tells you.'

Jesus' public ministry begins with a wedding. It was a wedding for a couple from a small obscure village a long, long time ago. I was wondering why we heard from the Book of Revelation, this morning too. But then I realized that John records another wedding at the end of the Book of Revelation. This is the wedding feast of the Lamb and His bride. Here, people not just from the local villages around Cana, or even Galilee or even Israel are invited to come, but everyone is invited. Here, we will not just be a special guest, but the bride herself. By God's grace, the work of preparation will be done by us, in us, through us. We could never make the journey to that wedding on our own. But we need not worry for Jesus is there to accompany us. It is a feast in which there is room for all who want to come, and where the wine, the new and richer wine, will never run out. That surely provides us with the clearest and most amazing clue, by far, about the meaning of the story of Jesus' visit to the family wedding in Cana, in Galilee.

Peter Smith

21/1/18