
Where the Wine Never Runs Out

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 19 January 2025

Isaiah 62:1-5 • 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 • John 2:1-11



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Our Gospel story today tells of Jesus' first miracle, and it is a famous one: turning water into wine. It happens at a wedding in the town of Cana to which Mary and Jesus have been invited. A wedding at that time in Israel was a big occasion, lasting several days, and involving the whole village in one way or another. The actual ceremony took place in the evening, following a banquet, and it is likely at this banquet that Jesus performed his miracle.

Mary and Jesus have come together; we might ask, where is Joseph? It is unclear, but many Bible scholars surmise that Joseph died young, when Jesus was still a boy. He is not mentioned again, after the story of Jesus in the temple with the elders. If this is correct, then Jesus would have been the mainstay of Mary's life, and she would have greatly depended on him in many things. So when the word goes around that the wine has run out, it is natural that she turns

to him to with the news, perhaps expecting him to do something about it. It is possible that Mary is an honoured guest at the wedding, perhaps related to the bride or groom, as she seems to speak with some authority when she tells the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to do. And when Jesus gives them directions, they obey him immediately.

We have often spoken about God doing a new thing, making a new creation, and this episode is all about emphasising that fact. Jesus' first miracle is a foreshadowing of his entire mission. The water he changed into wine was stored in six large urns, and was used for the ritual washing of feet and hands which the Jews practiced. As part of the host's hospitality, the guests' feet were washed as they arrived; and before sitting down to the meal, the guests would wash their hands carefully, with servants pouring the water over their hands while they rubbed them together. It is representative of the complicated practices God gave them to do when God handed down the laws to Moses.

Jesus' action in changing the water into new wine is a metaphor for the new way of faith and worship he would introduce in his ministry on earth. As he pursued his travels around Galilee, he developed his message of the new covenant, which he would illustrate with a cup of wine and a piece of bread at the Last Supper. Looking at John's Gospel, we can see the different episodes and the speeches he made which told of the new way of life in God's grace:

- ❖ He meets with Nicodemus and tells him that he must be born again, and that “whoever believes in [Jesus] shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:14). It is a simple thing, not like the complexity of temple worship. All you must do is believe in the Son of God. Jesus speaks of being the light which is coming into the world, the light which will show people the true way into God's presence, through light and truth.
- ❖ He meets the Samaritan woman at the well and tells her that “whoever drinks the water [he gives] him will never thirst ... [it] will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (4:14). Jesus is the key, and God has given him the power to grant life to whomever he wishes. Water is, of course, a staple of common, earthly life; in Jesus' hands, it becomes living water. It is a metaphor for eternal life. Water is also one of the most plentiful things on earth. God created the world, and our bodies, to be dependent on water. Just as we are dependent on water, so are we dependent on God's grace and love.

Water figures prominently in the Old Testament, but not with the same meaning. It was often a means of destruction: the flood waters covering the earth and killing every living thing, save the creatures in the ark; or the waters of the red sea which converged on the Egyptians, saving Moses and the Israelites. Here it is our very salvation, the water of life.

- ❖ Several times, Jesus repeats his teaching that belief in him leads to eternal life. When he preaches by the side of the lake, he says, “For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (6:40). In this chapter Jesus also begins to speak about the bread of life: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If [anyone] eats of this bread, he will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (6:51). In faith, Jesus is indeed bread and water to those who believe.

Jesus continues to develop these ideas throughout his three years of ministry. Usually, there is some reference to eating and drinking; always, it is Jesus who is the key.

Looking again at the miracle of water turning to wine, it is important to note the quantity of water which was transformed. If the water pots were typical of the time, they would each have held something like 100 litres, so six pots would have been around 600 litres. That’s a lot of wine, and remember that the guests at the banquet had already drunk all the wine that was initially provided. This enormous amount of wine tells us of God’s bounty. If we believe, we will not just be provided for in heaven. We will be tremendously blessed, and receive greater love than we can possibly imagine. God is always bounteous.

Note also the comment of the wine steward:

Everyone else serves the best wine first, and after the guests have drunk a lot, he serves the ordinary wine. But you have kept the best wine until now!
(2:10)

He is surprised that this new wine, whose source he doesn’t suspect, is of such fine quality. Most hosts would serve the best wine first, and then after the guests had had a bit to drink and were not so discerning, the cheaper wine would come out. But would we expect anything less from our Lord Jesus?

This passage also tells us another thing about Jesus’ for his people. A host who ran out of wine at a wedding banquet would suffer a great embarrassment. In the Jewish culture of the time, hospitality was a key virtue. When a guest came into your home, you gave of your best, even at a simple meal. Even more at an important event like a wedding would the host want everyone to have whatever they wanted, and to run out of wine at the height of the festivities would expose the host to a great deal of public shame. Jesus, as a Jew of that culture, would have realised that, and it would be part of the reason for the miracle. This banquet itself, then, can be seen as a foreshadowing of the great banquet waiting for us in heaven, where the wine and all the other good things do not run out. We look forward to that time, and give thanks to God for his promise, his bounty and his love. Amen.