

## **Wine (*Searching for Sunday*, chaps. 20-22) – Psalm 23, John 2:1-11**

I was reminded of another song reading the gospel reading we've just heard – one I doubt you've heard in church before! I'm going to sing a line and see if you can sing the next! Are you ready? ***“But there's-a nothing so lonesome, morbid or drear, than to... stand in the bar of a pub with no beer.”***

Yes, it's the song made famous by Slim Dusty, written by George Parsons in 1954, based on a poem published by Dan Sheahan in 1943.

But there are similarities with our story in John. It's a wedding in Cana not a pub, but there are colourful characters; the mother of Jesus (introduced first because she plays a big part) and Jesus and his disciples. And it's not the beer, but the wine that runs out! *But there's-a nothing so lonesome, morbid or drear- or disgraceful in this context - than a wedding with no wine.*

The story presents as a typical miracle story: a setting, a need, a miracle and a response to that miracle. For centuries of commentators, however, this has created some discomfort because sparing a family social disgrace does not seem as 'worthy' as healing the sick, feeding the hungry, or raising the dead!

But as the writer of John says – this is more than a miracle! This is the first of Jesus' 'signs' that in Jesus the presence of God is coming into the world; that in Jesus the reign of God – life and abundance and salvation - is breaking into the world.

We know this from the story's opening; when we're told this was 'on the third day', language suggestive of Jesus' resurrection.

We know this from the wedding setting because wedding and banquet imagery is used to depict the reign and realm of God, as in our psalm this morning; *“You prepare a table before me.”* Or in Isaiah 62:5; *“For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your [restorer] marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”* Or as in many of Jesus' parables.

We know this from the phrase 'my hour has not yet come'; an expression used throughout John that is rich in theological meaning about the reign of God and Jesus' consummation of that reign in his death and resurrection.

And we know this from the wine itself – a symbol of life in the coming reign of God. As Amos 9:13 says, *“The time is surely coming, says the Lord, when ...the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it.”*

In the story Jesus tells the servants to fill the stone jars used to wash the hands of guests and wedding vessels with water. There were six of them, the text says, and each held twenty or thirty gallons.

The original text speaks of *metretes*, an ancient Greek unit of liquid measure, 39-40 litres, which would mean each jar held between 80 and 120 litres. For six of them that is a total of 480 to 720 litres. For your reference, the largest sized wine bottle has the wonderful name, thanks to quaint 18<sup>th</sup> century custom, of a Melchizedek and holds 30 litres, so we are talking about 16 to 24 Melchizedeks or, coming back to beer, 4 to 6 barrels of beer.

But as one commentator says, *“For the interpretation of this miracle, what matters most is that a whole lot of water becomes a whole lot of wine!”* Each container is filled to the brim! And it is not just the quantity of wine, but the quality of the wine! As the chief steward says, and we know he is also speaking of Jesus and of the reign of God, *“You have kept the best for last! You have kept the good wine until now.”*

Wine as a symbol of the life of God is not only found in the biblical text. And not only reserved for wine! Dan Sheahan’s original poem on which *A pub with no beer* is based, ends like this, *“Oh, you brew of brown barley, what charm is thine? ’Neath thy spell men grow happy and cease to repine.... If there’s aught to resemble high heaven down here ’Tis the palace of joy where they ladle out beer.”* Or as the 5<sup>th</sup> century Irish saint, Brigid of Kildare, prayed *“I would like a great lake of beer for the King of Kings. I would like to be watching Heaven’s family drinking it through all eternity.”*

The response to the life of God, the response to Jesus, is, as verse 11 says, *“to believe in him.”* But we can struggle with this, can’t we? We can struggle with responding to, with receiving the abundance God offers us.

In chapter 20 of Rachel Held Evans’ book, *Searching for Sunday, Open Hands*, she writes, *“Ours is a culture of achievement, of sufficiency, of bootstrap pulling and ladder climbing. We celebrate the winners, the leaders, the do-it-yourselfers.”* To come to the table and simply receive from God then is hard for us. *“With giving, I can maintain some sense of power, some illusion of control. But receiving means... [and she quotes writer Nora Gallagher] admitting that we simply do not have all the answers; we simply do not have all the power.... It’s a scary thing to open your hands.”*

I have another image of this struggle to respond to God’s abundance. It comes from the final book in the Narnia series by C.S. Lewis. (I’m sure many of you have read it!). Do some of you remember this? Do you remember how at the end, when they are fighting the last battle, one by one they are forced into the stable – and they think is a place of death, but they discover it is the door to Aslan’s Country, the reign and realm of God. But there with them are a group of dwarfs, as in from folklore, who cannot see the bright and beautiful new world all around them, but believe they are still in a stable.

*“Aslan,” said Lucy..., “could you – will you – do something for these poor Dwarfs?”*

*“Dearest,” said Aslan, “I will show you both what I can, and what I cannot, do....”*

*Instantly a glorious feast appeared on the Dwarfs’ knees: pies and tongues and pigeons and trifles and ices, and each Dwarf had a goblet of good wine in his right hand. But it wasn’t much use. They began eating and drinking greedily enough, but it was clear that they couldn’t taste it properly. They thought they were eating and drinking only the sort of things you might find in a Stable. One said he was trying to eat hay and another said he had got a bit of old turnip and a third said he’d found a raw cabbage leaf. And they raised golden goblets of rich red wine to their lips and said, “Ugh! Fancy drinking dirty water out of a trough that a donkey’s been at! Never thought we’d come to this....”*

*“You see,” said Aslan, “They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief.”*

It is scary to receive and to believe, as Evans says, but – and she quotes Orthodox priest Alexander Schmemmann – *“The greatest humility and obedience is to accept the gift, to say yes – in joy and gratitude.”*

There is a second way we can deny the abundance and life and salvation that God offers and that is to deny it to others.

*“There are always folks,” Evans writes in chapter 21, “who fancy themselves bouncers to the heavenly banquet, charged with keeping the wrong people away from the table and out of the church. Evangelicalism in particular has seen a resurgence in border patrol Christianity in recent years, as alliances and coalitions formed around shared theological distinctives elevate secondary issues to primary ones and declare anyone who fails to conform to their strict set of beliefs and behaviours unfit for Christian fellowship.”*

That sounds eerily familiar doesn’t it!

*“But the gospel,” Evans goes on, “doesn’t need a coalition devoted to keeping the wong people out. It needs a family of sinners, saved by grace, committed to tearing down the walls, throwing open the doors, and shouting, “Welcome! There’s bread and wine. Come eat with us and talk.” This isn’t a kingdom for the worthy; it’s a kingdom for the hungry.”*

It needs a church that believes – do you know a church like this? - that the Good News of Jesus is for all people without qualification, a church that is deeply committed - - do you know a church with this commitment? - to creating a community of genuine welcome.



Can I just make a quick community news announcement! Six weeks from now, on Sunday 3 May, we are marking one year since we hung this banner on the church and demonstrated our commitment to that welcome. And we're doing this by throwing a little party – well, a combination morning tea and sausage sizzle with

balloons! – and over this month Steve and I have been inviting all the groups that use our centre to come, and after Easter that advertising we'll go out to the local community as well, but we need you to come too! And we need you – in good old church language – to bring a plate. And a willingness to say hello and extend that welcome. Can you put that date, Sunday 3 May, in your diary now – and – bring a plate!

In this chapter of *Searching for Sunday* Evans tells a story told by the Right Reverend Michael Curry (you will remember him as bringing the wine and the beer – all the genuine life – to Harry and Meghan's wedding!) about a young woman who became an Anglican (or Episcopalian in the US) during the 1940s and who invited the young man she was dating to come to church with her. Both were African American, but the church they attended that day was all white, and right in the heart of segregated America.

When the congregation started going forward to take communion he stayed firmly in his seat because he realised everyone was drinking from the same chalice. He had never seen black people and white people drink from the same water, much less the same cup. He watched his girlfriend as she waited for the cup, and then the priest lowered it to her lips and said, as he had said to the others, *"The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life."* He decided that any church where black and white drank from the same cup had discovered something powerful, something he wanted to be part of.

This couple were Bishop Curry's parents, and communion, he writes, *"is a sacrament of unity that overcomes the deepest estrangements between human beings."* This abundance and life and salvation that God offers us is for all people and brings us together to God.



I have a confession. This story of the wedding at Cana has been my favourite gospel story since I was a little girl. And this image of *Christ turning the water to wine* is by my favourite Australian artist, Margaret Preston. So, I am in my happy place this morning! And I love the references in what is clearly a dry Australian climate to the refreshing, life-giving presence of God; the blossoming tree, the

overflowing fountain, the water tanks and the water being turned to wine. But the wedding guests seem to be holding back a bit.

What does this story mean for us in our context?

I spoke to a fellow pastor this week who was feeling deeply disillusioned about the presence of that life and abundance and salvation in the Australian church – or the evidence of that life and abundance and salvation in the Australian church. *“I don’t see,”* he said, *“that it makes that much difference to the lives of people and the lives that they live whether they are part of the church or not. I am starting to wonder if the church was a failed experiment, and if that is the case, then what is God doing about it.”*

I said, yes, I understood what he was saying. Yes, there are plenty of Christians who seem unable or unwilling to experience God’s life and abundance in such a way that it overflows and quenches the thirst of the world around them, but I said (perhaps I’m being a glass half-full here) there are still Christians whose lives do; people who stand beside someone in distress, people who visit when others are in pain, people who pray, people who pray when we cannot pray, people who give generously – incredibly generously, people who speak up, people who turn up, people who are the love of God and the life of God in our context.

But I agreed with him as well. *There's nothing so lonesome, morbid or drear, than a church with no beer!*

Let us be a church that knows its need, its thirst, its emptiness and opens itself to be filled with all the fullness of God! And then, let us share - willingly, gladly, abundantly - this abundance with others! Let us be the life and abundance and salvation, the grace and completeness and sweetness, the wine and the beer of God for others.