

The Second Sunday of Ordinary Time 2019

Fr Jonathan Jong

John 2.1-11

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

What a coincidence: it is the Sunday before I am to be married, and here I find myself tasked with preaching on the wedding at Cana. The vicar works in mysterious ways.

A surprising number of people have asked me whether I will officiate my own wedding, which just goes to show how liturgically illiterate my friends are, many of whom are meant to be experts in the anthropology of ritual. It seems however, that I now have the option of giving my own wedding sermon in advance. But to do so would be step on the vicar's toes, which I have no intention of doing. On the other hand, preachers are almost always preaching to themselves as well as to their congregations. And this week, with these texts, that just seems unavoidable.

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Mark Kermode and Simon Mayo—hosts of BBC Radio 5 Live’s flagship film review show—are fond of saying that the 1975 Steven Spielberg shark thriller *Jaws* is not a film about a shark, but perhaps an expression of masculinity-in-crisis or political authority besmirched post-Watergate. Spielberg, incidentally, insists that it *is* a film about a shark¹, but what does he know? Death of the author, and all that.

St John, on the other hand, would not object, I think, to my saying that our gospel reading this morning is not a story about a wedding. It is, in any case, not a story about the bride and bridegroom, who barely make an appearance and never speak at all. As far as the evangelist is concerned, this wedding day is not about *them*; it is not their day, not their hour come, but Christ’s.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/may/31/jaws-40-years-on-truly-great-lasting-classics-of-america-cinema>

This is no bad thing for any Christian getting married to bear in mind, I suspect: weddings and their paraphernalia are perfect breeding grounds for narcissism, in no small part thanks to the wedding-industrial-complex that encourages us to tailor everything to suit our tastes, flatter our vanities, all for a price, of course. It is all too easy to hide, even from ourselves, the fact that marriages—and the weddings that mark their beginnings—are less achievements of their principle agents than gifts to them, from those who love them and ultimately from God. The generosity of this congregation here present to Ella Mae and me has been too great to go unnoticed.

Our story today is about a gift too. The wine has given out—*heaven forfend*—and the people's thirst are not yet slaked. Enter Christ, *deus ex machina*, to provide the face-saving hospitality, prestidigitated upon his mother's request. This move reveals Christ's power and authority over creation, even over the molecular structures of things, as he turns the H₂O of water into the phenols and polyphenols of wine. But we must not stop here, in the shallows of St John's

meaning, for whom miracles are not spectacles but *signs* of the new creation, creation renewed in Christ himself, God's own sign, given to us in love.

And not just for St John: Christian miracles are always signs, impossible things pointing to more impossible things that are, despite being impossible, nevertheless true. Whether it is water turning into wine, or wine turning into blood, the facts of the case are much less impressive than the deeper truth to which they point.

For this reason, there is something wrongheaded about debates over whether or not this or that miracle actually *happened*, not exactly because this is a stupid question, but because it is the less important one. Stories about miracles all throughout the Bible—and perhaps especially in John's gospel—do intend to describe how things are, or were once upon a time in Galilee: but they are more concerned with describing how things ought to be, and by the grace of God will be. They are vehicles, not primarily of memory or history, but imagination.

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What we are invited to imagine is a sort of topsy turvy world; or rather, we are compelled to imagine that our familiar world is the one gone awry, which needs setting to rights.

St John would have us re-think what it means to be *purified*, for example, by having us re-imagine our fonts filled to their brims with booze, which is less a critique of purification rituals than a reminder that purification is preparation for life, for the celebration and sharing of good news. It is a reminder also that *cleansing* is an incomplete metaphor for what happens in Christian baptism: after all, we do not believe that sin and evil are substances that require removal, but *absences* that require filling. So it is that these vessels of purification are re-filled with the water-turned-wine, are become chalices for us, from which we drink deeply of this earthy stuff, which across cultures and centuries has passed through joyful lips.

Our baptisms are a sort of death, to be sure: but baptism is also new life, which is life not to be

hoarded—hidden away as if it were a scarce commodity that risks running out—but life to be shared, abundant life that flows freely to enliven others, to bring them joy. Indeed, this is the true test of our faithfulness to the gospel: not whether we have managed to remain undefiled in Christian enclaves, but whether our lives have been characterised by giving, to one another and to the world.

Read in this light, our story—like all Christian stories—is a critique of any view of the world characterised by scarcity and of the human person as an individual struggling against other individuals, whose prerogative is to look out for himself, before concern is permitted to ripple out concentrically to the nuclear family, and the tribe and the nation-state, and only then beyond. On this view, which is the air we breathe, there is no such thing as society, only individual men and women, and their 1.9 children, preferably born well within wedlock. Marriage is therefore, like the house that is its common symbol, made of walls: and hospitality is an afterthought, extended only to a well-curated list of deserving folk.

This is, of course, the world we actually live in, which we have made, and in which the good wine should certainly be served first. How else will we keep costs down while still seeming generous? How else will the great and the good know to praise our taste and generosity, if their tastebuds are already dulled by the time the choice claret arrives? How else would we rise in the estimations of those we seek to impress, from whom we stand to gain?

These are the sorts of questions the gospel repudiates, which over and over again demands radical hospitality and self-giving, from this story of Christ's first sign and culminating in another story about water, this time mingled with blood, flowing freely from a Saviour's side.

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The second chapter of St John's gospel may well contain a story about a wedding, after all, but it does not offer particularly helpful advice for couples in the throes of organising one. What it does is reminds us that weddings and marriages,

if they are to be Christian ones, have to point to a different kind of world than the one we currently inhabit: a world, not of scarcity and insecurity, but of abundance and trust, trust that God enables us to live generously and hospitably, and that there is miracle in such a life. This is a world in which there are no such things as individuals and families, except in communities characterised not by their closed gates but by their open tables. Or, perhaps more in keeping with our story, open bars.

Wish us luck.

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