

John 2:1-11

## **Honour and generosity**

### **Weddings**

Supposed to be times of rejoicing and celebration and, in these parts anyway often large gatherings with lots of social interaction, weddings were another of the casualties of covid for much the first year and a bit of the pandemic here is Scotland. For a good while there were no weddings apart from emergencies – if someone was seriously ill or being posted – and even then the numbers initially were the statutory minimum – bride, groom, two witnesses and celebrant or minister. Couples were faced with the additional stress of trying to rearrange things over and over again, amid the changing regulations and the ever extending time scale. Wanting to get married, wanting to mark the occasion with their families and friends but not wanting to risk the health and well being of particularly older relatives and being hemmed in with all sorts of practical and emotional pressures over and above the “normal” stresses and strains – and joys(!) of planning a wedding. As we came out of the toughest of restrictions I was able to share in two weddings – one, I conducted, here in Old and St Andrew’s and one I attended – an uncle of the groom. I take my hat off to both couples, who having had to change their arrangements over and over and delay things and go through the roller coaster ride of emotions did remarkably well, and, in spite of the still existing regulations were determined to make a day of it and celebrate their wedding as best they could – for their families as well as themselves – and they did. What they may not have realised at the time is how significant were their weddings to others. People in Montrose commented that it was wonderful to hear the church bells and to see a wedding – “a sign of joy and happiness.” “We all need something to lift our spirits”. Of course, there are other ways to show human joy and celebration but still, we know that weddings are more than two people committing themselves to one another.

### **Cana in Galilee**

John shapes his book, compiles it, mainly in themes and weaves stories, not always in chronological order but thematically, to convey more and more about the person of Jesus and how God is working out his plans through him. So there is always more than a story, there is deeper meaning. And so, it is here in the account of Jesus at a wedding in Cana in Galilee. But, first, he was there as a guest like everyone else. We’ve to give place to the humanity of Jesus – and there is no reason to suppose that Jesus wasn’t there enjoying himself along with the other friends and family of the bride and groom. It was a big “do” – weddings then, even more so than now, were a joining of families, not just a joining of the bride and groom. It was often a community celebration too – and it was an opportunity for folks to rally round and support (sometimes practically) the couple and their parents. Mary, Jesus’ mother, was clearly a family member or close friend as she felt that she had some responsibility to help. It became clear that, horror of horrors, the wine was running out – that would really have reflected badly on the host. (I wouldn’t get too worked up about the alcohol – and there certainly wouldn’t have been diet coke). It could just as

easily have been food that was running short. Mary enlists her son's help. Initially, he is reluctant – responding “my time has not yet come”, but “under the radar” he does the needful. In a clear sign of faith in her son, Mary calls the steward over and tells him to do whatever Jesus instructs – and, as we know, wine, indeed wine of good quality is drawn from the large stone water jars – to the wonder of the steward, who was accustomed to using the better wine first and perhaps as some were less inclined to notice – poorer quality wine as time went on. And so we have an account of Jesus' first miracle – performed surreptitiously, away from the public eye – initially to help his wedding hosts avoid embarrassment and to allow them to celebrate BUT afterwards as the story was recounted – and for the benefit of so many down the centuries it is a pointer to the fact there was more than Jesus than met the eye, he was someone special – and increasingly throughout his gospel, John pulls back the curtain and reveals more and more about the person and work of Jesus, slowly stretching our faith and inviting us to respond accordingly.

### **Honour and generosity**

We sometimes pretend that “saving face” is more of a consideration for eastern nationalities. And it is true that it is particularly significant among many there and often there is greater sensitivity taken to avoid causing offence and loss of face to others, particularly elders or people with honoured positions. But, it can be an issue even here in Scotland too! And we aren't as sensitive to others' feelings! I'm not suggesting that we dispense with the truth in order to save face – there mustn't be one rule for those with position, power or influence and another for everyone else, but we don't need to rub one another's noses in it. Grace, understanding and sensitivity have their place – and I believe there is much in the way Jesus went about things, in the way he treated people, especially those who DIDN'T have power or position that we would do well to learn from. Here, at Cana, I see Jesus' concern for honour and generosity. He had no wish to draw attention to himself; for one, it was too early in his ministry to attract the scrutiny of the authorities (remember what had happened to John the Baptist) and in any event he didn't want to be known as a miracle worker, certainly not one who did wonders to impress or entertain. John is clear as he shares Jesus' wonders with us later in his gospel that they are presented to give us deeper understanding of who Jesus was and what he'd come to do – not for prestige, certainly not for cheap thrills for his audience. Jesus is content to remain in the background – but there are two aspects to honour in this miracle. One, the host is honoured. Not only is the host saved embarrassment, he is given additional kudos and honour and the whole community is saved from a mess up. But more significantly, Jesus is honoured too. In some ways, his honour is greater because he deliberately went out of his way NOT to seek it. Only a few were “in the know” as to what Jesus had done – and, I believe, his position is enhanced, not diminished by it. That is a lesson we would do well to learn. True honour comes through us being faithful and responsive to God and quietly getting on with furthering his plans and purposes rather than seeking the plaudits and adulation of others. There is nothing wrong with receiving quiet thanks or encouragement, but we need to be wary of positioning ourselves for human praise.

The ultimate accolade and the only one worth having is the final word from Jesus “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

The other aspect here is generosity. Jesus is generous both in the quantity and quality of his provision. I’m sorry if some are offended by the alcohol – it clearly would not have been an issue in the culture of the day. In some ways, it probably says more about our culture’s propensity to abuse alcohol and over indulge – while that can happen elsewhere, it does seem as though many other cultures don’t have the same issue. The lesson here in John is not about temperance or misuse of alcohol it is about generosity – another instance of God going beyond necessity to generosity – here, in quality and quantity. Too many people these days, if they think of God at all, imagine him to be a bit of an ogre or a spoilsport – they associate him with rules and regulations – thou shalt NOT’s – see him as being against enjoying themselves. In Scotland, there are still some remnants of a historic dour presbyterian austerity and simplicity of lifestyle that militates against any celebration and enjoyment of life. Even if it isn’t the fore – the church and indeed God can be tainted with such a view – in some people’s eyes Church or Christian = no fun. It is important to convey as much of the joy, love and celebration associated with living in the light of the gospel – and while we don’t need to have large jars filled with wine to do so – we really do need to shake off that dour historical presbyterian outlook – it does nothing to advance the cause of the gospel nor does it reflect the joy of the Lord. And perhaps one way we can contribute towards changing such a view, however, mistaken it is, would be for us to show a generosity of spirit in our dealings with others – that we go beyond what is “normal” to demonstrate the generosity of God towards his people – that may be in our welcome, in the way we speak to those who DON’T come to church, in our acts of kindness towards them (by the way – that was a marvellous response to the boxes of sweets and biscuits). And, if we are able to show our generosity without drawing much attention to ourselves then more of the glory will go to God.

Wedding, celebrations – Jesus could share in these as an ordinary guest; we Christians can have fun too – we don’t need to be seen as dour and spoilsport but beyond that here are two lessons from the passage: HONOUR – we can honour and support other human beings, ideally without making a big thing of our part in it and we can honour GOD too without blowing our own trumpet. GENEROSITY – here is another signal that God is exceedingly generous – pointers to his generous nature in all things – not least his grace, love and forgiveness and a clear steer for us to be generous with our grace, love, forgiveness and also our time and care for others.

Hopefully, weddings this year might be a bit freer from the restrictions.

May the Lord bless you! Amen.