

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 20th January 2019 10am

Revd Val Reid

John 2: 1-11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.' Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Sermon

Forty years ago, when I left university, I bought a car from a friend.

An evangelical friend at the church I had attended for three years.

It was a clapped out old mini, and I think I paid her £40.

Don't worry, she said.

Sometimes it stalls, and it's a bit hard to get it going again.

I usually just lay hands on the bonnet and pray.

That seems to do the trick.

Hmmmm....

But for £40, it felt like a risk worth taking.

The odd thing was, she was right.

Whenever it stalled, if you got out of the car, put your hands on the still warm bonnet, while the engine ticked quietly below, prayed, it would always start again.

Eventually.

I don't believe in that kind of miracle.

What kind of God wastes his magical powers on a cash-strapped student and her old car?

What kind of God thinks that running out of booze at a party is the right occasion for glory?

What's going on here?

I think John gives us plenty of clues.
On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee.
My hour has not yet come.
Jesus did this, the first of his signs.

These references open the minds and hearts of his readers.
They are a massive theological underlining.
A Kindle bookmark for the soul.

On the third day.

So what does that remind you of?
What other unexpected, extraordinary, inexplicable glory happened on the third day?

So what is this a sign **of**?

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, an abundance of good wine has been an eschatological symbol, a sign of the joyous arrival of God's Kingdom.
The new community which God is creating.
But here, on earth.
So here, at the very start of his ministry, Jesus vividly enacts what he has come to offer.
Extravagant grace.
God's generous and joyful gift.
Far more than you could possibly want or need.

But this sign is complicated.
It doesn't mean that no wedding will ever run out of wine.
That life will always be one big party.
That we will never be disappointed, or let down, or thirsty for what we can't have.
Two thousand years of history have made that perfectly clear.
This sign is now and not yet.
This is what God's radical grace looks like.
But it's just a taster.
We're not yet inhabiting glory.

In the synoptic gospels, there is a moment when Jesus is revealed in glory.
On a mountaintop.
Light beyond our imagination.
A voice from heaven.
Confirmation of what will be, before the long road to Jerusalem.
In the fourth gospel, there is no transfiguration story.
But there are glimpses of glory all along that road.
Moments when glory can't help but break through.
If you've got your eyes open.
If you're willing to turn aside and look.
Not like the steward who thought the bridegroom had pulled a clever trick of hospitality.

But like the disciples, who saw and believed.

So it's a sign.

A little glimpse of glory.

What will be one day.

But isn't yet.

Isn't now.

This evening marks the start of the Jewish festival of Tu BiShvat, the Jewish New Year for trees. When the people of Israel were an agricultural nation, this was a marker for calculating fruit tithes. You'd think that it might have been quietly dropped in our urban world. But Tu BiShvat has accumulated meaning over the years. Trees were always important. The prophet Isaiah saw a treeless land as a sign of desolation.

*'What trees remain of its scrub
Shall be so few that a boy may record them.'* (Isaiah 10:19)

This is what exile feels like.
But in the midst of this wilderness God has a message for the people.

*A shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse.
A twig shall sprout from his stock.* (Isaiah 11:1)

However desolate things look, however bleak things feel, there is a powerful urge for re-growth.
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things.
The remnant will grow and thrive once more.
Eventually.

Tu BiShvat comes at an odd time of year here in the UK.
In Israel, this is when you can expect to see the first blossom coming out.
Here, Spring feels a long, long way away.
But now is a good time to celebrate trees.
If you look carefully, there are a few buds beginning to swell.
Spring will come, even though there are few signs of it yet.
But now is the time, while it is still cold, while it still gets dark soon after 4 o'clock, now is the time to start planning for what will surely come.
Tu BiShvat reminds us to look out for new life.
Now and not yet.
Today is also the 350th anniversary of the birth of Susanna Wesley.
Mother of John and Charles.
I rather like Susanna.
A feisty woman who wouldn't allow herself to be defined by the rules.

Susanna's husband, Samuel, was the rector of Epworth.

In December 1711, when Susanna was in her forties, her husband set off for convocation in London.

It was a journey of 140 miles, the roads were slow, convocation – then, as now – takes ages.

He wouldn't be back till March.

In his absence, the associate priest, the reverend Godfrey Inman, was in charge.

Samuel wasn't very popular with his flock.

Godfrey Inman even less so.

People started staying away from church.

Meanwhile, back home, Susanna continued with her usual pattern.

She had ten children, and each Sunday afternoon she would sit down in the kitchen and tell them Bible stories.

Teach them something about the faith of their church.

Everyone in the house joined in, including the servants.

Susanna was a good storyteller.

One of the young servants told his family about these fun afternoons.

They asked if they could come along.

All were welcome.

Others heard about it, and began to come too.

Soon there were 40-50 people crowded into the kitchen at the rectory.

The people would sing together, pray together, share stories about their faith.

The reverend Godfrey Inman was not pleased.

He wrote to Samuel Wesley in London to complain.

Samuel Wesley wrote to suggest that she should back off.

Other ministers' wives didn't lead Services in their kitchen.

Could she please conform.

But Susanna wrote back to explain how this had started.

How popular it had become.

200-300 people are now attending, she tells him.

She will stop if he absolutely forbids it.

But...

If you do, after all, think fit to dissolve this assembly, do not tell me that you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience; but send me your positive command, in such full and express terms as may absolve me from all guilt and punishment for neglecting this opportunity of doing good, when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Samuel, wisely, let well alone.

In the early eighteenth century we were nowhere near a church where men and women could be equally called to preach.

Where God could be worshiped in kitchens as well as in parish churches.

But Susanna was a breath of fresh air.

A tree beginning to put forth buds still in the depths of winter.

New wine in the old stone purification vessels of religious practice.

I think this wedding in Cana reminds us to look out for signs.

Signs of glory.

Little epiphanies that show us something of God's surprising grace.

Here and now.

Despite the political mess and turmoil of our country and our world.

There are still buds beginning to form.

There are still women breaking the mould.

There is still water being turned into new wine.

Amen.