

Epiphany 2 - Sunday 19th January 2025

John 2:1-11

A Sermon by Pat Hemsley, Lay Reader

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.

Don't we all love a wedding? The planning and preparation, the guest list, the anticipation as the day draws nearer, the anxiety over last minute hitches and finally, hopefully, the joy and love shared...all these play a part in what are usually lovely, memorable occasions. The account of the wedding at Cana tells us that things haven't changed much in two thousand years; we see a wonderfully human scene, lively and detailed, peopled with very recognisable characters and we could almost be there! There's the somewhat harassed, later puzzled, bridegroom, Mary, the guest whose watchful eyes miss nothing, Jesus and the disciples, a group of lads, perhaps friends of the groom, and there's a host of flurried waiters, under the direction of the steward, the wedding organiser. He is tasked with making sure everything goes smoothly, and of course, it doesn't. The wine runs out. And then, thanks to Jesus' intervention miraculously it hasn't; the new wine proves to be of a much better quality than the old wine, which further flummoxes an already flustered steward.

Underneath all the seemingly ordinary details of this passage from St. John's Gospel, a reading which we know so well, there are so many messages, so many strands that could almost inspire a season's worth of sermons. We could think about new and old wine, or about what the incident tells us of Jesus' relationship with his mother. We could ponder the significance of water... and what about the words which begin the story, "on the third day". Yet this time, the words that leapt out for me were spoken by Mary. "Do whatever he tells you," she said to the servants; do whatever Jesus tells you.

The idea of being told what to do doesn't always sit easily, does it? In fact, it's human nature almost not to do what we're told, especially if the directions are given in a strident manner, or with an over-authoritarian tone. Children will often do exactly the opposite to what they're told, as they challenge authority and experiment with their own burgeoning independence. And if doing what we're told indicates obedience, then Jesus himself didn't do what he was told

as far as earthly rules and regulations were concerned. He was, however, totally obedient to his heavenly Father and this was because he knew and understood God's plan. He knew what his role was, he trusted in God and therefore, he knew he was to do exactly what God told him to do, even when that led to the cross.

Similarly, when there is a purpose, an understood outcome in our own lives, it becomes much easier for us to follow what someone tells us to do. We follow "doctor's orders" in order to maintain or improve our health, even if that proves difficult or against our natural inclinations. We take advice from professionals about legal, financial and safety issues and we often need to be told what to do if we're learning a new skill. Frequently, too, when we're in trouble or any kind of difficulty, we look to someone who will tell us what to do in order to improve or solve things.

In Cana, Mary knew that the lack of wine at the wedding wasn't just an inconvenience; it was a social disaster and a disgrace. The wedding would probably involve the whole village and guests from the neighbouring ones as well. It could have lasted several days, and the groom's family carried an obligation to provide good hospitality for all. This wasn't the blip that may happen at the best of weddings even today ----cakes collapsing, rings being dropped into inaccessible places, guests falling over on the dance floor and brides spilling wine on to expensive dresses--- this was a shame the family would have to live with for a long time. It may even have been regarded as bringing bad luck to the married couple.

In bringing the situation to Jesus' attention, Mary recognised both the problem and the answer. We'll never know what Mary had learned about her son in the thirty years she had nurtured him, how much she really understood of his mission from God, but she knew enough to instruct the servants to do whatever Jesus told them. They listened to her and they listened to him and they did what he instructed. So was Jesus' first miracle performed and as water was transformed into wine, so was disaster transformed into joy and hope.

On Friday this last week, the lectionary remembered St. Anthony of Egypt, who was born in the 3rd century BC to a relatively wealthy family. Having read the verses from Matthew's Gospel which say, "go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven", Anthony did just that in obedience to what he felt God was telling him to do. He became a hermit and a very influential figure in the early church. Anthony wasn't alone;

there have been a chain of believers, saints named and unnamed, throughout the history of Christianity, who have played a part in God's plan because they did what Jesus told them to do.

Their example and Mary's words stand good for us, too. The key to living a faithful Christian life is to do whatever Jesus tells us to do, whether or not that's something that accords with our own wishes. It should form a fundamental part of the relationship we have with our Lord, as we strive to play our own individual part in God's plan. However, possibly the most difficult part is discerning what it is that Jesus is saying. How do we know what it is he wants us to do?

I think there are three things we need to do; ask, listen and obey. The first we do through prayer and I suspect we're more than ready to take our difficulties and problems to him and ask then what we should do. However, it's probably not something we do so much when life appears to be going well, when it's easy to convince ourselves we're on the right track anyway. But we know that Bishop Debbie has asked that we make prayer in its many forms a focus this year, and we know that prayer is a central part of maintaining our relationship with God. Perhaps we should start each morning by asking "Lord, what would you have me do today?".

It's no good asking, though, if we fail to listen to God's replies. If we ask, he will respond, be it through the Scriptures, through the actions and words of other people, or in the silence we share with him as we spend time in quiet stillness and meditation as part of our life of worship. Sometimes, if we're receptive He speaks very clearly in ways we didn't expect but can clearly recognise; it can be like being given a heavenly poke in the back, a "I'm here with you and this is what I want" moment which cannot be ignored.

Just as Jesus spoke to his disciples, so he will speak to us, his modern-day disciples, because dialogue is crucial to the building and maintaining of relationships. And above all he wants a personal relationship with each one of us. So when he speaks he will ask specific things of us, things that we can accomplish as no-one else can, things that are part of our individual role in God's plan for the world. Sometimes he will speak more gently, in a way which makes it easier to comply: at other times he will speak authoritatively, with commands and directives that must be obeyed, even at some personal cost.

But if we love him and want to follow in his footsteps, comply we must. He is, after all our Lord and God, our Saviour. Obedience to him is a part of our spiritual discipline. However, trusting in our Lord, we can be certain of two things. He will never ask to do something which, working in the strength of the Spirit, is beyond our capabilities, beyond our scope. Secondly, obeying Jesus can bring about amazing transformations, both for ourselves, and for the world in which we live - turning the ordinary wine into the very best it could be, as it were. Today, we remember and treasure Mary's words; "Do whatever he tells you to do." Amen