

The Best Wine

Second Sunday after Epiphany, Year C

Alison Kershaw 19th January 2025

Isaiah 62.1-5; Psalm 36.5-10; John 2.1-11

***Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word,
Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen***

You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord ... you shall be called My Delight Is In Her (Isaiah 62. 3, 4)

They shall be satisfied with the good things of your house: and you will give them drink from the river of your delights. (Psalm 36.8)

From the prophet Isaiah, a promise of reunion and a joyful new beginning for humanity as at a wedding with a bridegroom rejoicing over the bride. And from the Psalmist, a celebration of enduring kindness, justice, refuge, enlightenment, and yes, *delight* as we drink from the river of life.

Then from this stream of delight we come to John's story of the wedding at Cana, and hear Mary tell her son Jesus: "They have no wine." As the festivities, which would have run for a week, are in full swing, the wine has run out. The supply of wine – sign of hospitality and shared happiness - has been drained. It is from this this scarcity and emptiness that Jesus works his first miracle or sign in John's gospel. It is one of overflowing, joy-giving abundance – turning water into approximately 500 brimming litres worth of celebratory wine!

And yet Jesus seems reluctant to perform this miracle

And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.'

If this sounds harsh to our ears, it is a problem of translation and modern usage when 'Woman' can shamefully be said in a demeaning way. I once heard, for example, neighbours arguing and a raised male voice say, 'that's enough woman!' But this is absolutely not the way in which Jesus addresses Mary – quite the opposite, it is a term of honour. As Julia Hejduk explains, in Greek the word used is *gynai* - it would not have been normal for a son to address his mother in this way, so the use of the word has special significance in relating Mary to the first woman, Eve. Mary is a new Eve taking her part in this new chapter of salvation. When the time comes, Jesus implies, the relationship between you and me, Woman, will be restored, and I will be revealed as the bridegroom of humanity. Rather than a statement of not caring about the wedding party, Jesus' words are a rhetorical device foreshadowing the eucharist - the offering of the wine of his blood in a sacrament of union with us all.

Jesus again addresses Mary as *gynai* / woman when the hour of his death has come. From the cross he gives her and his beloved disciple John into one another's care:

"Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. (John 19:26-27)

In giving his mother – the new Eve – to his beloved disciple, Jesus gives her to each of us. Julia Hedjuk points out that he also addresses three others as *Woman* in John's gospel – the Samaritan woman at the well (4:21), the woman caught in adultery (8:10), and Mary Magdalene (20:15) - who each take the part of a New Eve in various ways.ⁱ To Mary Magdalene he speaks his first words after the resurrection. She has risen early to visit his tomb only to find it empty. She does not recognize him and supposes him to be the gardener. He asks, *Woman why are you weeping?* She weeps because she thinks her Lord has been taken away and she weeps for all the sickness and violence in the world – for all that she and the world lacks. But he has not gone, he is standing before her and speaks her name, and commissions her to be the first bearer of the good news. (John 20.11) These two, the second Adam and new Eve, meet in a dew laden garden, a second Eden, early in the morning of the first day of a new creation. This bride and bridegroom are reconciling humanity and all creation in the love of God. We can hear an echo of the wedding at Cana, with the empty wine jars being filled with new wine.

Returning to this scene at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, his mother Mary is not thrown by the reluctant response – she knows it is not a refusal; she, the one who gave her assent to God, knows it is time for Jesus' work to get underway. Her agency is to notice “They have no wine” – and to give voice to this lack. How many kinds of lack might we give voice to? What is lacking in our world or in our own hearts? Mary also understands and has faith in what her son will do to restore a state of abundance – without further comment she simply tells the servants to follow his instructions, and so water is turned into wine – and poured out for the many guests.

We might explore symbolic meanings in other elements of this story – the third day, and the six jars made of stone, but the essential sense of it comes down to a sense of renewal and the free-flowing goodness. It seems the feast can continue with even greater joy than before. I am gratified by the insight of the steward who observes to the bridegroom that:

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.¹

- for that is just how our New Years Eve party ushering in the year 2000 panned out – only instead of wine, we were sampling champagne from the cheapest to the most expensive (though I have to say no-one quite remembers what the best one was!) At that party a group of friends wrote down the highs and lows of their current life and their dreams for the future. These bits of paper were put in a time capsule for 25 years and opened on New Year's Eve a few weeks ago. It was a poignant moment – children had grown up, two dear friends had passed away, and some wished they had been less flippant (or perhaps less drunk!) when writing these letters to their future selves. But most of us had expressed optimism – that current obsessions and heartaches would be gone – that we would be freer, exercising our gifts in meaningful ways, and surrounded by love.

Some of this, for some of us, came to pass – but for some the future was to be harder than they had imagined. As we get older perhaps we are prone to falling into the habit of believing – often with just cause - that the good stuff came early, and the rest of life is a slow process of depletion. There may be battles with the world and with ourselves that seem destined to exhaust and empty us. We may experience grief for past times. We may find ourselves feeling blank, dry, disappointed, or lacking in ways we can barely describe.

So the story of the wedding at Cana is one of profound hope because it assures us that the best wine has been kept for just this moment when we find we have nothing left. An epiphany, or the grace of a quiet reassurance can come to us when we are at our lowest. But we do not have to wait – we don't have to drain the barrel first - the good wine is always to hand and flows through all our days and hours, restoring and sustaining us as a river of delights. And there's more! In drinking the best wine we are united in a sacred bond with the source of all life and joy, and so we can also know ourselves as beloved, as rejoiced over, and a true delight.

Amen

¹ Julia Hedjuk, *The Riddle at Cana: Mary and the Biblical Mystery*. Church Life Journal, November 17, 2020 (<https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-riddle-at-cana-mary-and-the-biblical-mystery/>)