

Sunday 21 January 2018

John 2:1-11 and Revelation 19:6-10

What do you experience when you think of a waterfall? Is it the noise, an almost roaring of water as it rushes over the top of the falls, hitting outcrops and then landing in the pool at the bottom? Is it the spray, drenching everything around and giving life to plants in the vicinity? Is the glint of sunlight off the water, sometimes breaking out into little mini rainbows? Is it the sheer force of the water? The sheer amount of the water? Is it marvellous to behold or slightly frightening? Have you ever walked behind a wall of water and seen the waterfall from the other side? Have you swum in the pool at the bottom?

The passage from Revelation starts with the writer telling us what he is seeing and hearing in his vision of heaven. A sound like a great multitude, like the rushing of many waters (a waterfall if you like) like the sound of thunder-peals, crying out and praising God. So, add to your experiences of waterfalls, the experience of all the choirs you have ever heard singing all at once and all the electric storms you have been in and you might get an impression of mind boggling experience John is describing. And the reason for this noise, this song, this rejoicing is that heaven is celebrating a wedding. It is celebrating the event that is the marriage between Jesus (the Lamb) and God's people (the bride). The wedding is seen as a time when heaven and earth intersect.

When Jews reflected on what heaven or the arrival of the Messiah would be like, they thought about banquets and wedding banquets would be the obvious model. Jesus used weddings and wedding banquets to illustrate several of his parables. And the gospel reading tells us about one particular wedding where Jesus was a guest. But it's more than just (!) a story about turning water into wine, a significant thing in itself. It's more than Jesus rescuing the host family from social shame.

It is the first sign in John's gospel that Jesus is the Messiah. And it's also chock full of symbolism. It's a foretaste of the heavenly feast that is the cause of the celebrations in Revelation. And it starts to spell out some of the changes that Jesus will ask of those who follow him.

Water, as we have seen when thinking about our experiences of waterfalls, is amazing. It is life giving, it can also be life threatening. But without it there is no life.

Jesus used 6 large jars of water, filled to the brim. The jars were being used for purification, for the washing of hands before eating. They weren't any old pots that happened to be around. The jars and the water can be understood to be the law and the prophets, the teachings of the Old Testament. Absolutely fundamental. There's no two ways about it, this was, is, fundamental. For the two greatest commandments – to love the Lord your God and to love your neighbour as yourself - come from that law. But this glorious new wine can be understood to be a new revelation of God's abundance through Jesus. A sign that God is doing new things within the Jewish system, bringing purification to Israel and the rest of the world in a new way.

The story is about transformation.

And that transformation starts with someone (the servants) taking Mary's words seriously: 'do whatever he tells you'.

Having Jesus among us alters the nature of our religious rituals. In the passage from Revelation, the angel who shows the wonders of heaven to the writer, rebukes him when overcome he falls at the angel's feet to worship him. He is told: 'Worship God', don't worship the messenger.

So, is there anything in our corporate worship or in our personal reflections and prayers, that ends up putting a value on things that aren't really about God or Jesus? Are there things that we might let go of, things that with the best of intentions have ended up getting in the way, have come between us and God, when we thought they were the way to God? Is there anything that is like the water, when we could be experiencing the abundance of God's wine?

It is also about transformation of our relationships. As we go about restoring the relationship between ourselves and God, so God will work with us to restore the relationships we have with our families and with one another. The healing of wounds that we cause one another from a failure of human love, of broken relationships, of lost relationships.

And if your relationships with God or with each other are in need of healing, of restoration, please do come after Communion to receive laying on of hands for healing.

The gospels all show us that Jesus brings us forgiveness and judgement, healing and illumination, mercy and grace, joy and love, freedom and resurrection. He brings salvation into being through leisurely conversations with his followers, through intimate personal relationships, through passionate prayer and his sacrificial death.

Part of the business of Christian life is to be in the world, turning water into wine, being part of the healing, being part of the abundance that God wants to pour out, being in some sense a waterfall of love, of grace and of blessing. For some of us that will be very active, for others it will quieter, more reflective. Whichever it is, it is likely to be done through relationships, with God and with each other. May we hear that nudge that Mary gave to the servants: 'do as he tells you' as we go about our lives this week. May we respond with hospitality and generosity of time, where we see unhappiness, injustice, conflict, and a lack of human dignity. May we be prepared to share with others where we need to experience God's grace and loving care. May we listen to each other.

Amen

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