**6th October 2013**

**John 2:1–11; 1 Cor 12.1-11**

A young boy was thinking about marriage and spoke to his father about it. ‘Dad, why did you marry mum?’

His father thought about the question for a moment and said ‘I guess I felt I was incomplete.’

His son continued, ‘Do you feel like you are complete now?’

The father paused in thought for a long time and finally said, ‘Usually, I feel I am complete; but sometimes I feel like I’m finished!’

Read that ambiguous statement how you wish, maybe according to your own experience.

This story of Jesus at the wedding in Cana has the wine running out. It is finished – the party is over. It is an embarrassing and humiliating climax to what should’ve been a day to remember. Now it is potentially collapsing into a day to forget.

Do you feel as though you are finished? That the best wine has run out – there is not much to look forward to. The best has gone – it’s all in the rear view window.

There is always a dread in society: 'Will we have enough?'

It has been a theme of the party political conferences these last few weeks. Concerns at the cost of living, making ends meet, is there enough to go round, are some people doing better than others – is there enough?

At the wedding, which Jesus attended in Cana of Galilee, there was great joy but a problem developed. There was a shortage of wine.  Not only was that a social embarrassment, it was also a symbol. For a wedding to run out of wine was an omen that there was little chance of this particular marriage reaching its full potential, maybe joy was not meant for this
couple.

So Mary approaches Jesus and asks him to do something. His response: "Why do you involve me woman?" Sounds harsh, so unlike him, and it has long puzzled biblical scholars. But you have to look at this scene in its historical context. Jesus, at this moment, had not performed a single miracle. He was thirty years old and he had just gathered together his disciples. He knows that if he performs a miracle, a clock will start
ticking and it will not stop until he gets to Calvary. Crowds will flock; investigators will be dispatched. Is this the appropriate moment? Jesus thus makes his move and gives his first public sign that he is different; he transforms water into wine. It is a crucial moment for Jesus and the disciples.

John’s gospel has a series of signs or signposts that take you through the story of Jesus and point to his significance. They are moments when the transforming power of God’s love bursts into the present world, when heaven comes down on earth.

 This story of water into wine is about transformation: the different dimension of reality that comes into being when Jesus is present and when, as Mary tells the servants, people get caught up in doing what Jesus tells them. Life with Jesus Christ is not about scarcity and making do – it is abundant life!

I know from many encounters with people they see church and Christianity as a straightjacket that will cramp their style and limit their freedom and make them into prudish, judgemental, religious bigots. Sadly that can be true – some types of religion are toxic.

I have to say that the more I follow Jesus Christ the more I realise how shocking he is and what an adventure it is to follow him.

Take for example this miracle and its literal implications

It began to dawn on me that following Jesus is quite an adventure and is anything but boring.

These stone jars that he told the servants to fill with water were calculated to hold 150 gallons. That’s’ about 1000 bottles of wine. That must have been some party. There is no holding back from generosity – oh you need some more wine – mmm haven’t you drunk enough – maybe have a couple of bottles more but watch yourself. Let’s go down Lidls and get some cheap Bulgarian plonk.

1000 bottles of wine!!! And not just any wine -= the best – ‘you have saved the best til last’ is the comment of the master of the ceremony. Shocking! Following Jesus Christ is not dull – believe you me.

Years ago on an American talk show, Johnny Carson interviewed an eight year old boy. The young man was asked to appear because he had rescued two friends in a coalmine outside his hometown in West Virginia. As Johnny questioned the boy, it became apparent to him and the audience that the young man was a Christian. So Johnny asked him if he attended Sunday school. When the boy said he did Johnny inquired, "What are you learning in Sunday school?" "Last week," came his reply, "our lesson was about when Jesus went to a wedding and turned water into wine."
The audience roared, but Johnny tried to keep a straight face. Then he said, "And what did you learn from that story?" The boy squirmed in his chair. It was apparent he hadn't thought about this. But then he lifted up his face and said, "If you're going to have a wedding, make sure you invite Jesus!" The little boy was on to something. Weddings are time of
Joy.

Having Jesus around the place transforms life.

Of course I am biased because I’m a church minster so I am always going to give you a sales pitch. But I would argue that despite the bad press we often get, having faith in God, being part of a church, is good for you. Research suggests that having faith gives you an identity, a sense of meaning and purpose, a connected ness, community, helps you find perspective and makes you more open to ask questions on difficult subject’s particularly of the ultimate questions about life and death. You also tap into the power and love that is at the heart of the universe.

In an ordinary marriage, husband and wife rely on their own efforts to face the demands that marriage brings. But when god is there there is the extra X factor: You’ve recognised that there is a spiritual dimension to life, and to marriage. And you see love as keying into the profound love of God which is history long and universe wide. That is Holy matrimony. It transforms relationships.

The water of an ordinary promise can be turned into the comforting wine of a lifelong trust.

Today we make four new members – who stand before us and make their promises to join with us in our work and worship and witness through this place. It is a great thrill for us and hopefully for them. Together, as Paul writes in our passage from 1 Corinthians, may the spirit of God transform us and gift us to be the Body of Christ in this place.

I am deeply inspired when some of our senior members keep coming up to me , wide eyed with wonder grappling with something from scripture, still renewing their relationship with their Lord, still being inspired, transformed, asking questions, prompted into action because of the gospel.

The spirit of Jesus transforms us – makes us more generous, makes us more open to ourselves and others, the way of Jesus is not to blame someone else, or pay back evil for evil, but to transform pain into love and hurt into forgiveness . He opens up a way to reverse the whole of human history.

The Bible uses different kinds of metaphors of transformation: ‘born again’ new life’ ‘being in Christ’ ‘dying and rising’. The world has a te4ndency to shape our identity and way of being – making us self-concerned, worried about our image, our achievements, our affluence. As we are transformed by the gospel we rediscover our true self – loved and accepted as the people of God. The transformation is inward – our own personal lives and also affects us outwardly, communally.

In Jesus' response to the needs of those gathered at the wedding feast, we have an attitude and action pattern to echo: noticing, reflecting, and acting. Mary noticed the need. It was discussed. Possible courses of action were considered. God's concern for all was demonstrated. Celebration resulted.

The transformation from water to wine is of course meant to signify the effect that Jesus can have, can still have today, on people’s lives. He came that we may have life in all its fullness. All of us. Which means not just personal transformation but the transformation of society to a more just and equal world. We know there is much work to be done and that there is much opposition and obstacles to seeing that transformation complete.

When faced with the realities of the world it can be a bit glib to use such examples as the little boy saying ‘if you’re going to have a wedding, make sure you invite Jesus to it!’

Transformation can be painful. It can take time. The best is still to come – the best maybe a long way. The best may not be this side of eternity. We yearn for the best to come.

Preparing for the fishing Course meeting last Thursday I read about how this sense of dissatisfaction and restlessness for something more is a point of contact for the gospel with those in the world. Many live lives hoping that the next job, the next house, the next car, the next partner, will satisfy them and make their life complete finished. But it never does. This sense of dissatisfaction can lead us on the road to discover God. The Christian faith states that we are created in god’s image and our and there is a divine dissatisfaction with the world – not a dissatisfaction with God but all that is not God. As St Augustine so pithily put it: ‘you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you’.

 We are doomed to remain incomplete. Our hopes and longings will remain hopes and longings. There is a bitter sweet tension which remains, even for the Christian, who becomes increasingly aware of the wonder of God but also of the inadequacy of our present grasp and experience of that wonder. We yearn for a distant country, we hope for the best that is yet to come. The difference between the believer and the non-believer is that our hope is sure and has a focus.

You might want to pray through this story with your own failures and disappointments and longings in mind – remembering that transformation only came when someone took Mary’s words seriously: ‘do whatever he tells you.’ Sometimes when we are dry in our spiritual lives, when Jesus doesn’t seem to be transforming us we may need time out, maybe a wise Christian guide to help us, or time alone with the gospels once more needing to be in the company of Jesus to have our relationship renewed.

Mary is an enabler in this story. How do we like her, seize the hour and the moment, to enable our communities to live with celebration and joy?

Paul in the passage about spiritual gifts says God gives gifts in the church for the common good – how do we together build up the body of Christ – how do we together bring that transforming joy of Jesus Christ to our community?

Mary seized the hour and the moment to act in this story. Transformations only happened when people were getting desperate and were in need. How do we capture the moments when things go wrong, hand them over to Christ and allow our churches, our homes, our gatherings spaces to become transformed by God’s life and energy?

The church is responsible to provide a clear and consistent vision of what it looks like in God's household, God's economy, and God’s reign of peace. And the church is responsible to help our people find ways to work for social justice.

There is enough for all is our simple creed. Our worship is a rehearsal of God's reign. The meal around the table is a political gesture of how we want the world to be transformed.

We start by getting Jesus to the party.

A film a few years back called Babette’s feast reflects something of the transforming power of joy and celebration. It was the story of a repressed, overly pious community in Denmark where two beautiful daughters of the religious leader have to forego the love of their lives in favor of a religious and moral uprightness. There is a split between the spiritual and the material. Instead of God being found in all things, the Spirit was not to be found in the things of this world, such as eating, drinking and human sexuality. Babette, the poor French maid of the daughters, wins a lottery ticket and spends the whole sum cooking an exquisite meal for the whole community. She has a helper who does what she tells him in preparation and serving.

And the result? Babette becomes an angel of God’s joy. As the meal unfolds, you watch the people slowly take delight in the delicious tastes and smells. They begin to open up to each other, hardened hearts become soft, grudges are healed and their senses and pleasure become a means to God rather than something to be fearful of and avoided. They become a deeply thankful people.

 Isak Dinesan who wrote the book Babette’s feast uses the story as a parable of grace: a gift that costs everything for the giver and nothing for the recipient.

At the end of the story General Loewenhielm tells the grim faced parishioners gathered around him at Babette’s table:

 ‘We have all of us been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and shortsightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite…. But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude.’

Twelve years before, Babette had landed among the graceless ones. Followers of Luther, they heard sermons on grace nearly every Sunday and the rest of the week tried to earn God’s favour with their piety and renunciations. Grace came to them in the form of a feast. Babettes feast, a meal of a life time lavished on those who had in no way earned it, who barely possessed the faculties to receive it. Grace came to that community as it always comes: free of charge, no strings attached, on the house. No shortage. Cheers.