

**SERMON AT 8.00 AM HOLY COMMUNION (BCP)  
AT ST AGNES' CHURCH, FRESHWATER BAY  
AND 11.00 AM HOLY COMMUNION (CW) AT  
CHRIST CHURCH, TOTLAND BAY ON SUNDAY  
21<sup>ST</sup> JANUARY 2018 (3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY)  
BY JAMES COOK**

**Readings: Revelation 19.6-10 and John 2.1-11**

**Title: 'A Sign of the Times'**

**Aim: To help us understand more deeply the  
significance of Jesus' changing water into wine.**

When you read your daily newspaper or you pick up the latest news on the TV or the radio, I wonder what kind of news thrills your heart and lifts your spirit. For many people, high on their list of favourites would be a wedding. Marriage – happy marriage – is still good news, and a royal wedding especially.

Next on the list of popular news favourites is anything that tells us a wrong has been righted, a disease has been conquered or a justice has been done.

In the second chapter of John's Gospel, we read how the ministry of Jesus begins with such good news. First a wedding is celebrated and then the Temple, centre of religious life at the time, is cleansed from corruption.

Today, we think about the wedding feast and about how it is blessed by Jesus.

In today's Epistle reading, we are reminded here that marriage is regarded in Scripture as a representation of the intimate, vital and self-giving relationship between God and his people.

In the Old Testament, Isaiah had declared:

“For your Maker [capital ‘M’] is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.”<sup>1</sup>

Here in the New Testament's Book of Revelation, the crowd before the throne of God cries out:

‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure.’<sup>2</sup>

How does your relationship and mine compare with this Biblical picture? Are we as close to our Maker and

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 54.5 (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 19.6b-8a (NRSV).

Redeemer, as intimate with each other as a bride and groom? Or are we only good friends or perhaps just nodding acquaintances with God? A deeper, loving relationship with God becomes possible for us all, as we encounter personally Jesus the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus attends a wedding feast and he ensures that there is enough wine – best quality wine – to celebrate the occasion. He offers to celebrate with us, in the same spirit of undeserved generosity, the new and living relationship with the living God that he makes available to us all.

John the Gospel writer concludes his account of Jesus at the wedding with these words:

‘Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.’<sup>3</sup>

We are probably aware, though we might not be able to say how or why, that John’s Gospel is very different in style, and often in content, from what we call the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. One of the notable differences is that John writes of what he calls ‘signs’ (his Greek word is *semeia*) while the other three write about acts of power and portents (they use the Greek words

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<sup>3</sup> John 2.11 (NRSV).

*dynameis* and *terata*). It is worth digressing at his point, so that we may appreciate more fully what the Gospel writers are telling us about the ministry of Jesus.

John's 'signs', as one learned Bible commentator puts it, are:

‘...special actions by Jesus which reveal his glory to those who believe and which confront others with the need to decide about Jesus.’<sup>4</sup>

Does today's Gospel reading reveal to you and me the glory of Jesus, or does it confront us with the need to decide about Jesus? For some of us, perhaps it does both.

Matthew Mark and Luke do not record the changing of water into wine. According to the same Bible commentator, for these Gospel writers the miracles of Jesus are ‘...acts by which Jesus establishes God's reign and defeats the reign of Satan.’<sup>5</sup> We might recall some of their accounts of the sick being healed and demons cast out and then ask ourselves whether we want to continue the work of Jesus. Will we, through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, make our own lives and the lives of our communities places where God reigns and Satan is defeated?

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<sup>4</sup> Milne, B, *The Message of John*, IVP 1993, p62.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Let's now return to what John tells us about Jesus at the wedding feast.

In the culture of their community, a wedding feast would last for several days and many family members, friends and neighbours would be invited. Although produced locally, wine was too expensive, it seems, for ordinary people to drink except on special occasions. It was essential for a wedding feast: people would save up for a long time in advance. If the supply proved inadequate, there would be dishonour and deep shame for the family.

It is understandable, therefore, that Mary the mother of Jesus wants him to help. Jesus, still coming to terms with the nature of his ministry and the dreadful prospect of the cross, when his 'hour' will truly come, is at first reluctant, but he comes to understand the need and he is willing to act.

It is highly significant that Jesus changes water set aside for ritual purification into wine for joyful celebration. He replaces Old Testament temporary cleansing from sin with New Testament personal transformation and lasting redemption from the power of sin.

The Old Testament rituals brought no permanent relief to a conscience burdened by failure. Nor did they empower the penitent to take the change of direction required for a better life. The old cleansing rituals could not generate the joy and the gratitude for a life transformed, which would

stimulate a mission to share God's love with others. All these changes for the better needed the wine of the New Testament – the shedding of the blood of Jesus upon the cross for each one of us.

In receiving the bread and wine of Holy Communion today, may we recall the sign of the wedding feast: may we see the glory of Jesus and may we decide more about who he is for us. Amen.