

16Jan2022 John2.1-11

First reading Isaiah 62:1-5

This reading is written about the time when the people of God had returned to Israel after the exile but were still weak and with many problems. Listen to what God intends for his people, how he intends to restore his people and land to much more than ever before, and how he intends to relate to his people.

John 2:1-11 – Transformation, abundant grace and obedience

I'm going to be looking at the gospel passage today from John but first – as I'm speaking about change, transformation today – I just want to make one comment about our wonderful Isaiah reading.

The people of God addressed in our Isaiah passage today were in a depleted state – a bit like St Matthew's now, a remnant left from what we used to be, without much hope of being able to do much for ourselves. That was where they were left too. But God's intentions were that that would change. He intended to bring about an amazing transformation in their circumstances and especially in their relationship with him. And now we know that he fulfills that promise through Jesus.

John's gospel reading today is the well known account of Jesus changing water into wine. We hear of Jesus and his disciples and his mother all being at the same wedding together in Cana. The wine which the bridegroom was responsible for supplying runs out. Mary tells Jesus and expects him to do something about it. He says it's not really his business but, out of compassion for the wedding couple, turns the water in the stone jars nearby into an amazing amount of rather good wine and his disciples get a real boost to their belief in him.

Today's gospel passage is also about transformation. It ends with John describing this as the first sign Jesus did. John uses this term to describe the signposts which take him through his account of Jesus life – like clues to the meaning of his story. He mentions what the second one is too (also while he was visiting Cana again – healing the royal official's son) and then John leaves it up to his readers to work out what the next signs are. So what do these signs point to? This passage follows John's setting of the scene with opening stories about John the Baptist and Jesus' early followers. The last one is about Nathanael being told Jesus knew him and saw him under the fig tree when they had never met and then Nathanael believing in Jesus being the Son of God, the real king of Israel because of that. In the description of Nathanael deciding to follow Jesus, Jesus responds to Nathanael's faith by

promising that he will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. The signs John points to are all occasions when Jesus did what he'd just promised Nathanael he would do. They are moments when, to people who watch with at least a little faith, the angels of God are going up and coming down at the place where Jesus is. That is, they are moments when heaven is opened, when the transforming power of God's love bursts in to the present world. That is what is happening when Jesus changes the water into wine.

Therefore though it is a 'sign' it is definitely a real event and John describes the details as he often does in his accounts, things like the 6 stone water jars used for the purification rites.



These stone jars held the water used in ritual washing because they were not subject to the impurity laws in Lev11:32-35 which demand that clay vessels which become unclean must be smashed. Though they are much more expensive to make in the first place (they have to be carved from a single piece of stone using the kind of lathes that were only available during the Roman occupation of the area), in the long term they are more economic because they can be used repeatedly, even if they come into contact with things that are ceremonially unclean. These are ones that were found in a 1970s excavation of a house from that time in Jerusalem.

This account of the wedding at Cana is about transformation: the different dimension of reality that comes into being when Jesus is present and when, as Mary tells the servants, people do whatever Jesus tells them. This is one of only two occasions we meet Jesus'

mother in this gospel, the other being at the foot of the cross (chapter 19). This is important, because Jesus' strange remark in verse 4, 'My time hasn't come yet', looks on, through many other references to his 'time', until at last the time does come, and the glory is revealed fully, as he dies on the cross. That event, for John, is the ultimate moment when heaven and earth meet. That is when it takes all the faith in the world to see the glory hidden in the shame: the creative Word present as a weak, dying human being. But events like this one, the transformation of water into wine, point on to that moment. The wedding is a foretaste of the great heavenly feast in store for God's people (see Revelation 21.2). Our Isaiah passage also refers to the great wedding there will be between God's people and himself. The water-jars, used for Jewish purification rites, are a sign that God is doing a new thing from within the old Jewish system, bringing purification to Israel and the world in a whole new way.

The wedding itself, in the town where Nathanael came from, would probably involve almost the whole village, and several people from neighbouring ones too; which is why Mary, her son and his friends were invited. Running out of wine was not just inconvenient, but a social disaster and disgrace. The family would have to live with the shame of it for a long time to come; bride and groom might regard it as bringing bad luck on their married life. Though Jesus hereafter in John's account addresses himself to other kinds of problems, we are already witnessing the strange compassion, which comes where people are in need and deals with that need in unexpected ways. So this transformation of water into wine is also a transformation of the social situation from shame to glory.

And finally this event points to the abundance of God's grace. We are told the volume of water transformed into wine was the equivalent of about 700 - 1000 bottles of wine. That would keep a village party going for some days! And it was the best wine – better than the wine the bridegroom had presumably tried to offer first as good wine. The extravagant grace of God would have been clear to those who witnessed this miracle. God's glory was revealed to the servants and disciples. And the result was faith that in Jesus heaven does indeed break through on earth.

The transformation from water to wine is of course meant by John to signify the effect that Jesus can have, can still have today, on people's lives. He came, as he says later, that we might have life in all its fullness (10.10), abundant life.

Do you want this? In your own life? In the life of this church of St Matthews? Simply transformation is change. Change is not always what we want. We can be very comfortable with the ways things are, or even prefer the bad we know to whatever else might be. Many

fear change. And then the world is full of change at present, what with the pandemic, global weather changes, new technologies, getting older and everything else. It can feel good to have some part of your life that doesn't change – our life with God and our church life perhaps. But if we are honest with ourselves – can you describe your present life as abundant, as full of God's extravagant grace? I can't. I know all sorts of things need to change in myself especially. Our church also could not in any way be said to be showing God's glory in the abundant grace flowing freely here. God wants to draw us closer to him, to shine his light of love through us into the darkness that surrounds us. But that will involve change, transformation. We need first of all to trust him that however he leads us, and however difficult or painful that change may be, it is because he loves us and wants the best for us. God loves us extravagantly – will we trust him through the change that realizing that in our lives will entail? Can we truly pray : Your kingdom come on earth as in heaven when that means radical change?

Then we need to remember the attitude of Mary and the servants who enabled the miraculous sign to take place. We need to take Mary's words seriously: 'Do whatever he tells you.' Like the servants did. It is our obedience to Jesus that enables the abundant grace to flow to God's glory. How do we know what Jesus tells us to do? We immerse ourselves in the accounts of what Jesus said and did – the Gospels. We read them and think about what Jesus says to us through his words and through his actions which show us what loving God and loving your neighbor as oneself means. And then as we obey, heaven touches earth through him and we see more of God's glory revealed. And we are transformed from glory to glory into Christlikeness. (2 Corinthians 3:18). We pray: Your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Finally as a church we could be put to shame – we are weak and small, fragile and depleted. But in Jesus, heaven touches earth, the transforming power of God's love can break through, as we trust him and do what he says. Our shame can be transformed into the glory of God.

Shall we pray for us and our church to be so changed, so transformed, that heaven touches earth among us, that the glory of God is revealed , his Kingdom comes, his will is done, on earth as it is in heaven.