



Online Circuit Service – 16 January 2022

Reflection

Led by the Revd Naomi Oates

A few years ago, my husband Luke and I were invited to a wedding of a good friend. We were asked to RSVP to the bride's parents, who we'd never met. They hadn't specifically asked about dietary requirements, but we added a note to say 'just in case it's helpful to know, we're pescatarian.' Next thing we knew, we had an anxious message from our friend. It turned out that, in response to our message, his fiancée's parents had reserved us a disabled parking space. Luckily, we worked out what had happened in plenty of time, and we didn't have to go without our dinner.

Lots of us haven't been able to go to many weddings over the past couple of years. Perhaps you're waiting to attend one that has been delayed two, three, even four times. We attended my cousin's wedding last summer, which had already been deferred twice. We took my daughter Rachel with us, and realised that we'd chosen our menu options before we even knew I was pregnant!

Weddings are events where good food and good hospitality are always important. That was true, too, for people in Jesus' day. The importance of hospitality in Jewish culture comes up time and time again in the Gospels. We see Jesus being invited to meals at the houses of friends, Pharisees, tax collectors. On one occasion, when Jesus was eating at the house of Simon the Pharisee, a woman snuck in and, to their horror, began to wash Jesus' feet with her tears, and to dry them with her hair, and to anoint him with expensive ointment. Simon and the others looked on in disgust, and murmured that Jesus should really have known that this woman had a bad reputation. But Jesus said: "I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love." For Jesus, good hospitality and great love were tied up together.

We don't know whose wedding Jesus was attending with his mother and his disciples – perhaps a family friend. But we do know that it would have been a disaster to run out of wine, and not to be able to offer hospitality to the guests, even when the wedding has already been going on for three days. Mary notices before the rest of the guests that the

wine has run out, and points it out to Jesus. Jesus says, a little rudely, perhaps, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come.' In John's Gospel, timing is very important. Later in the Gospel, Jesus will say that the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. But even though Jesus responds in this way, still Mary sidles up to the servants and says: 'Do whatever he tells you.' Perhaps Jesus' response, which reads a little like rudeness to us, was more of an inside joke, or perhaps his mother knew him better than we give her credit for. Only a couple of weeks ago, we were thinking a lot about a teenage Mary, on a donkey, on the way to Bethlehem, and then Mary as a new mother, gazing at her baby in a manger. Perhaps we don't spend enough time thinking about Mary in her 40s, the mother of a man in his early 30s, a man who so far has lived an ordinary life in Nazareth as the son of a carpenter, but who Mary always knew had something else in store for him. Before this wedding, Jesus had started to gather together a band of followers, but he hadn't yet started teaching, or performing miracles. Just maybe, he was a little nervous about the idea of leaving behind his comfortable, ordinary life for a road that would eventually, inevitably, lead to the cross. 'My hour has not yet come.' And yet Mary had faith. Mary knew what Jesus could and would achieve. We don't think enough about Mary, not just as the mother of Jesus, but as his faithful disciple, who prompted him to perform his first miracle, who stood at the foot of the cross, who carried on meeting with the other disciples after Jesus' death. She knew that sometimes, the right moment to respond to a need is exactly when the need presents itself.

And so, despite his protests, Jesus tells the servants to fill six water jars with water, around 180 gallons, enough to fill a hot tub. He tells them to take some out and take it to the master of ceremonies, who declares it better than any wine they've served so far. Disaster is averted, and Jesus' disciples who came with him to the wedding begin to see just what the man they've chosen to follow is capable of.

In John's Gospel, Jesus performs seven signs, seven miracles that reveal his glory. This is the very first. John the Baptist has already provided a teaser trailer for Jesus' ministry, and now comes the grand opening, setting the scene for what is to come. And in turn, Jesus' ministry is a glimpse of what life in the kingdom of God looks like. So what can we take from this first sign? Well, we can infer that the kingdom of God isn't a place of scarcity, but abundance. Jesus, when the wine runs out, doesn't provide just enough to get them through to the end of the wedding – he provides a hot-tub-full. He doesn't provide cheap wine, thinking the guests won't notice because after three days, they're already pretty sloshed – he provides the very best. We see this pattern repeated in the signs that follow – in 12 baskets of leftovers after Jesus feeds thousands of people, in a miraculous catch of 153 fish, in 100 pounds of spices used to anoint Jesus' body. When we have communion services, we say that the little bit of bread and wine we share is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. Jesus' ministry was another foretaste of the abundant feast prepared for us in the kingdom of heaven, where Isaiah says that on a mountain, all people will gather for a feast of rich food and well-matured wines. (I'm sure there'll be a non-alcoholic option for the Methodists, too.)

So God's kingdom is a place of abundance. But today, so many people in this world don't even have the bare minimum. In 2015, the Joint Public Issues Team produced a report called 'Enough,' prompted by concerns that the Welfare & Reform Bill would push even more people in Britain into poverty. Today, so much of what is in that report still feels relevant, with rising energy costs and many businesses feeling the ongoing impact of the pandemic. The report talks about all the evidence that shows that a lack of money prevents families from flourishing and children from reaching their God-given potential. It talks about all the passages in the Old Testament that say that, where a society has plenty to go around, no-one should be left without enough: "If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbour. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be..." (Deuteronomy 15:7-8 (NRSV)). In the New Testament, in Jesus' parable about the labourers in the vineyard, they are each paid, not according to the number of hours they worked, but according to their need – each received a daily wage, even if they hadn't done a full day's work, because that's what they needed for them and their families to survive and to thrive.

The miracle at the wedding at Cana is a reminder that God's vision for us is one of abundance, of life in all its fullness, of riches beyond what we can ask for or imagine. But as we look around us, we see the gap between that vision and our reality. We see that while some of us have an abundance, many don't even have enough, and we know that we are called upon to share what we have so that all God's children might be able to reach their potential. We are called to seek and to strive for justice, and for equality. And that's something the Methodist Church is going to be pursuing over the coming months with its 'Walking with Micah' project, something that Rachel Lampard is going to introduce to us before our next hymn.