

God is not a Kill-Joy (John 2:1-12) – Encounters with Jesus 2: Mary.

Many people dismiss Christianity as a root into puritanical joylessness, with lots of rules and regulations designed to stop you having fun. Yet, in John chapter 2, we find Jesus at a wedding celebration turning water into wine. Not only is Jesus keeping the fun going, but this sign points to deeper truths about the eternal joy that God longs to give us.

The sign...

Last March I drove to Sissinghurst one evening to see a friend being installed as a vicar in the church there.

It was a long drive through country lanes in the dark in a part of Kent I didn't know.

I was feeling a bit lost, so much so that I stopped to try and consult the map on my phone.

When I stopped and looked ahead of me,

there was a road sign and for the first time it said, 'Sissinghurst!'

Now I knew I was on the right track and not far from my destination. I could move on with a lot more confidence and a lot less panic. I now no longer felt lost!

With all that is going on in our world, there can be a sense of feeling lost. Many of the things we have taken for granted in the past have been removed from us because of the Pandemic.

The world is becoming a very strange and worrying place and we can feel lost, confused and panicked.

We need signs of hope!

At the end of our reading, in verse 11,

it says, "What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory." (John 2:11)

When people like Mary his mother and his disciples encountered Jesus they saw the signs and it changed their view of who he is and what God has come to do radically. As we join in with this encounter of Jesus, let's see what the sign is showing us about who Jesus is and what he can do for us.

So what does this sign show us?

A sign that God is not a kill joy

Firstly, it shows us that God is not a kill joy!

When I was a child I remember saying to my mum,

I will become a Christian when I am much older because I want to enjoy life first!

Somehow I had swallowed the idea that wild living in your teens was where real joy came from, that that was real living. I didn't want to miss out on that by becoming a Christian - at least not too soon.

In the same way lots of people see God as a kill joy, putting unnecessary limits on fun.

And Christian history seems to back that up:

Originally, 'Religious' was a word used to describe only those who were nuns or monks. To be serious about your faith you had to commit to a life of celibacy where you would never marry. Even today Christianity can give the impression that God is against sex.

Then in the nineteenth and twentieth century, many Christians became very anti-alcohol. There was a strong Tee-total movement that encouraged people to give up drinking altogether.

The overall impression given and one that still lingers is that God is against us doing the things that make life enjoyable and fun!

Yet, that is a complete distortion of the truth.

Firstly, here is Jesus at a wedding - God is in favour of marriage and sex. He invented it! He told Adam and Eve to go forth and multiply, which certainly involves sex!

And what is more in this story, Jesus turns water into wine. This is a miracle that crusaders for tee-totalism would find difficult.

Surely, if nothing else, this first miracle that John recalls, is a sign that Jesus brings fun to the party. He is certainly not a party-pooper!

Now of course this is not drugs, sex and rock and roll. As we will see there need to be healthy limits to how we enjoy these gifts of God, but God is very far from a kill-joy!

In the end I did become a Christian when I was nine, and I have never felt that I've missed out on fun or joy in life as a result. No, the truth is I think my life has been far more full of fun and joy as a result.

As Jesus says later on in John:

"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10)

Don't dismiss Christianity because you think you'll miss out on joy as a result.

A Sign of Hope: "My time/hour has not yet come..." (vs. 3-5)

Secondly, this is a sign of hope for future blessing.

One of the more puzzling features of John's account of this miracle is Jesus's encounter with his mother Mary.

Clearly Mary has great faith in Jesus. We know very little of Jesus's life between his birth and this point, but the events of his birth and no doubt the way Jesus had lived his life since had led Mary to believe that Jesus had it in his power to sort out any problem.

So Mary with great faith brings the problem to Jesus. There is no more wine. The bridegroom who was responsible for providing the wine had messed up and faced great embarrassment.

Jesus's initial response is: "Why do you involve me?" He has a point. This is not his wedding, it's not really his problem.

Then he says something rather odd: "My hour or time has not yet come."

What does he mean by that? Why is that relevant here?

As the Gospel develops, Jesus's hour or time becomes code for his coming crucifixion, resurrection and glorification, the climax of the whole Gospel. But this meaning of the phrase gradually develops through John's account.

Here it is simply linked to Jesus's ability to keep a wedding celebration going. So why does Jesus say it at this point?

Well as I've said it was the bridegroom's responsibility to provide the wine. At one level Jesus could be saying simply, it is not my wedding. It's not my responsibility to make sure there is enough wine.

And yet, Jesus does sort out the problem. He does ensure there is more than enough great wine for the wedding.

What I think Jesus is doing with this statement is pointing beyond what he is about to do, to what he has really come to do. In chapter 3, John the Baptist will describe Jesus as, 'the Bridegroom'. Jesus's wedding, was not going to be an earthly party, but the great banquet celebration at the end of time, when he and his bride the church are finally joined together.

Jesus is saying to Mary, "Although I will do something amazing to sort out this problem, my role is not to come and make life a bit better now, but to provide something fantastic for eternity!"

But that cannot happen until his time has come. The true blessings and joy of the heavenly banquet cannot happen without his cross, resurrection and glorification.

Great as the miracle of turning water into wine was it is meant only as a sign to something far greater. It is a sign of hope.

As we go through a life that often seems to have more struggles than joys, when God doesn't always answer our prayers to make life a bit better now, we need to have this bigger perspective of what Jesus has come to do.

When he does answer our prayers and makes life better now, it is only a sign of what he has in store for us in eternity. But before then there will be suffering and struggles. God doesn't promise that life will always be easy, but he does show us that when we trust in Christ it's ultimate goal, will be completely fantastic.

And that hope can give us strength to live through even the darkest times.

Jesus's miracle of turning water into wine was the first sign, but it was a sign that points to our ultimate end with wonderful blessing from God.

A Sign of Grace: Stone Water Jars for Ceremonial Cleansing (vs 6)

So this is a sign that God is not a kill joy.

It is a sign of hope, but it is also a sign of grace.

Many people reject Christianity because of they think that it is fundamentally about following rules and regulations and feeling guilty if you don't.

In this miracle, Jesus takes a symbol of the Jewish Law, the stone jars for ceremonial cleansing and uses them as part of a more profound sign. Jesus did not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfil it.

Limits to Protect

The Law is a good thing. God puts limits around our human activities, not to limit our joy, but to protect us from damaging behaviours.

"Do not commit adultery." (Exodus 20:14)

is one of the Ten Commandments. It is a law against having sex with the wrong person. It is there not to ban sex, but to stop sex being used in a way that damages or destroys your most important relationships. The Bible is clear sex in marriage is there for our joy and to strengthen the marriage, outside of marriage it is bad and damages relationships.

The same is true when it comes to alcohol. Generally speaking the Bible sees wine as a blessing, but getting drunk as a curse. Drunkenness causes unwise behaviour and in the long term destroys your health. God gives wine for our pleasure, but its use needs to be limited for our good.

The Law is a good thing and Jesus does not come to tear it up.

The Problem of Shame

The problem is that most of us fail to stick to the limits, and when that happens the Law stops protecting us and starts condemning us. Our temptation can then be to throw out the Law in order to reduce our shame and guilt.

Jesus, however, offers a different and better solution that this miracle is a sign of.

The Story of Grace

At the wedding at Cana, the bridegroom was facing deep shame for his failure to provide enough wine. Perhaps he hadn't planned carefully enough, perhaps he was not being as generous as he should have been. The result was that he now faced a life in this small village of being labelled as the one who did not provide enough wine for the wedding.

Jesus had no obligation to help him out. It was not his wedding, he was not the Bridegroom, there was no obligation to do anything for this man.

But he does. He doesn't just provide a bit of wine, he provides 800 bottles worth. And he doesn't just provide cheap plonk, but the best wine. In doing so he rescues the bridegroom from shame and actually makes him look good to the head steward!

This is grace! Jesus giving us what we don't deserve and removing our guilt and shame.

The jars were meant for cleansing, Jesus transforms them into a means of cleansing the bridegroom's guilt away and so restores his joy. He uses them as a sign of the greater cleansing his death, resurrection and glorification can bring to all who trust in him.

As it says at the start of the gospel:

"For the law was given through Moses;
grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (John 1:17)

And this helps us follow the Law. If we know it won't lead to our shame and guilt, because of Jesus's grace, then we can embrace it as a good law to live by. A law not to condemn us but to protect us and show us how best to enjoy God's good gifts.

A Sign Pointing to Jesus: "and the disciples believed in him." (vs. 11)

Far from being a kill-joy and someone who has come to limit life, Jesus comes to bring us joy and life to the full.

Jesus wants us to enjoy the good gifts God has given for us to enjoy. More than that he wants to point us to the ultimate hope of the joyful wedding feast in heaven and he wants to cleanse us of our sin and guilt.

This miracle was the first sign of what Jesus had come to do. It was a sign of joy, hope and grace.

The disciples saw this sign and chose to put their trust in him for life.

When I was nine I decided to put my trust in Jesus for a joyful life.

Have you decided to put your trust in Jesus? Do you trust him to bring real joy in life? To give you a certain hope that sustains through dark times and to graciously cleanse away all your shame and guilt?

Will you stop being lost and follow the sign?