

The Miracle of Transformation.

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 19 January 2025

A Reflection by Allison Gentle

Epiphany 2C

Psalm 36: 5-10; Isaiah chapter 62: 1-5; John 2: 1-11

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

We gather today in the season of Epiphany, celebrating the early signs that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, and taking into ourselves the significance of those signs. We have already marked two of those signs, the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus, and Jesus's baptism. Today we mark the third of the signs, you've just heard the story, the miracle at the wedding at Cana, when Jesus turned water into wine, a story only told in the gospel of John.

John begins his gospel quite differently from Matthew and Luke. There is no genealogy, no nativity scene, no snippets from Jesus' childhood. Instead there is a prologue that starts with the words "*In the beginning,*" and briefly retells the story of creation with Christ, the Word of God and the light of the world, present from the very beginning. These words and others from John are foundational to the later understanding of God as Trinity.

The rest of John's gospel can be seen as the re-creation story, when the light of Christ came into the world. Right from the start, he refers to the rejection of Jesus, as well as his transforming presence in the lives of those who did recognise and receive him. For this reason, John highlights the need for people to recognise that Jesus is the Christ and honour the God who sent him, so the Word will dwell in them and they will receive the Holy Spirit.

John's account of Jesus' earthly life starts with his interactions with John the Baptist, one of the first to recognise Jesus as Christ. The resonances between John the Baptist and Isaiah's prophecy of the Messiah coming gave weight to this sign of Jesus' identity. Mark also began his gospel with John the Baptist and an adult Jesus.

John says that Jesus performed many miracles, but he only chose seven to relate. The reason he chose to tell the story of the wedding at Cana was because it was the first miracle the earliest disciples witnessed. John said, "*He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.*"

Another distinctive quality of John's gospel is that it prioritises spirit over historical chronology. Those who take the time to read John carefully will find themselves in a dense web of symbols: meanings that ricochet around the whole biblical narrative, references repeated and elaborated elsewhere in John's gospel, harmonising with some symbols found in the other gospels, and echoing foundational symbols from the Hebrew scriptures.

We see this in the opening sentence of the story: “*On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee.*” The previous four stories had begun “*The next day.*” Trying to count back to see how this was the third day is futile. Christians all know what “*On the third day*” means. So although we are in the season of Epiphany, we are also in resurrection life, and in John’s world, that is perfectly fine. It reminds me of the deliberate disorientation of the classic fairy tale opening: “*Once upon a time in a land far away...*” It signals that the setting of the story is more a plane of consciousness than a particular place and time. John’s story-telling encourages us to let go of analytic thought and abandon ourselves to the world of symbol in which he places his gospel.

While the opening “*On the third day*” puts us in mind of the resurrection, the setting of a wedding banquet is a symbol of the realm of heaven, sometimes called the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, also used in other gospels. The references to the creation story in the prologue could also send a hapless reader down the rabbit hole of what happened on the third day of creation, but I don’t recommend doing that. That’s two hours of my life I’ll never get back. We are in Epiphany, and in resurrection life, also in the realm of heaven, and about to find ourselves in a kind of nativity. I think that’s enough.

As I said, John’s gospel doesn’t have a nativity scene. His first mention of Mary is in the wedding at Cana, but in a sense she births Jesus’s ministry. She tells him “*They have run out of wine.*” It’s a classic parent and adult child dynamic. He instantly knows she is asking something of him, not telling, they’re an adult, just asking. Not even asking really, just letting them know there is something they could do, if they chose to. If a carpenter’s mother said that to her son at a wedding reception today, he would know he was meant to jump in his ute and head for Dan Murphy’s and he’d better be sure there were funds in his card account.

Jesus resisted. He knew his mother was asking him to use abilities that she knew he had, and that he didn’t feel ready to show the world yet. “*My time has not yet come.*” Another allusion we’ll leave alone. At some level Jesus was ready as he had already been joined by four or five of his disciples. Mary gives another labour push. “*Do whatever he tells you,*” she says to the servers. Jesus would have heard her saying, you’re going to tell them to do something, and he does, and his ministry is born.

Coming to the actual turning of water into wine, does this have deeper meaning than saving the bridal families from the embarrassment of failing to keep refreshments up to their guests for the long duration of a traditional, lavishly hospitable Jewish wedding? This is John’s gospel, so of course it does have deeper meaning.

The stone jars he asked the servers to fill up with water were normally used for ceremonial washing. This was a set of practices with a lot of rules, to be found in detail in Leviticus and Exodus, and it’s easy to dismiss them as empty observances based on purity laws that Jesus was here to sweep away with his winnowing fork, but they were designed to bring the faithful back into alignment with God. And Jesus said in Matthew that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it.

Either way, the master of the banquet said that the wine was better than the wine that had run out, and clearly better than water for partying wedding guests. And as the master of the banquet usually means God in this trope, I think we can guess that the significance of the story is that Jesus was transforming one way of worship into another, transforming the ways we can relate to God. This resonates with his later conversation with the woman at the well, when he says, *"A time is coming and has now come, when the true worshippers will worship the father in spirit and in truth."* Again John's penchant for timeless time.

So back in our earthly season of epiphany, a time of spiritual renewal, what does this story have to say to guide us? The gospel story today shows Jesus' power to transform. It is not possible to turn water into wine by any natural means. We all have to choose how to respond to miracle stories. In John's gospel with its world of symbols, it's easy to say they are the foundational myths of our faith. Calling miracle stories myths doesn't mean they aren't true, it means they point to truths that are deeper than facts. And there are things we can't do that God in Christ can do, we know that. Nothing is impossible with God.

I've been thinking of some remarkable transformations, like people who have gone through terrible grief and come out the other side, able to enjoy life again. Isn't that miraculous?

People who have rejected a part of themselves and become tormented with self-hatred, but who have learned to accept themselves and live openly as who they are. Isn't that miraculous?

People who have endured terrible suffering in their childhoods and have come to a place of peace. Isn't that miraculous?

People who have been able to forgive someone who did them a dreadful wrong, brutally killed someone they loved. For the feelings they had about that person to turn to forgiveness, is that any less miraculous than for water to become wine? All these transformations, are they not miraculous?

Anita Cobby's father was offered a position on the Serious Offenders Review Council, to represent the view of victims. He knew he would have to meet prisoners and might meet his daughter's killers. He prayed, or in his words, *"put it out to the Cosmos,"* and the next morning he woke to the words, *"Forgive their souls. Leave the rest to the law and may the law not let you down."* He said, *"I went into a bit of a meditative state, saying, 'I forgive the five souls of those who destroyed my daughter's physical body,' and I immediately felt good. I had been directed to no longer harbour ill-feeling against them, so after that all I could do was put their physical beings and actions out of my mind."*

A journalist asked him how he was going to handle going into jails and possibly meeting his daughter's killers and he told her. She duly reported it as leaving the rest to the Lord. It's not really so different.

The prophet Ezekiel said that God could take away a person's heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Many of us have seen that happen or felt it ourselves. How can stone become flesh? It's transformation, it's a miracle, and it really happens.

So one way we can take into ourselves the light of Christ this Epiphany season is to ask ourselves, what transformation in our lives do we think of as impossible? And then pray to the God who turned water into wine, to ask them for a miracle, and leave the rest to the Lord.

May we all be blessed with miraculous transformations. Amen.