

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 22 MAY 2011

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Isaiah 62: 1-5; Psalm 4; Mark 16: 7- 8; John 2: 1-11

“Water and Water”

Six jars full

In the story of the wedding at Cana, every word carries an ocean of meaning. There are references to the Jewish Scriptures, symbolic numbers, symbolic actions, references to the life and ministry of Jesus, to the Kingdom, and to the life and faith of Jesus’ followers of every age woven into the fabric of the text everywhere.

Wine

Wine plays a central part in the story. In scripture wine is a symbol of joyous living and abundance. At the communion table the wine reminds us of how Jesus himself made the connection between the wine and his life that was poured out to give life, a life of grace and abundance. The nations are served premium quality wine on the Mountain of the Lord where the prophet Isaiah imagines all the nations will come together at the end of time. According to Jewish Interpreters, on the third day of creation, it is the vine that shoots up first and bears fruit, after the waters of the deep have been gathered together and dry land is formed. The wedding takes place on the third day. That it is also the day God renews his covenant with his people by raising Jesus can hardly be a coincidence.

The third day, the day where the deep waters of agony and pain are gathered to make way for the land of God’s promising, where the true vine shoots up and is resurrected to bear fruit in abundance. Wine is the drink of the Kingdom, and in the Christian tradition it is pressed from the fruit of that true vine, that conquers death on the third day, Jesus Christ.

You can see that, even at the mention of the word wine alone, words, meanings and associations start to tumble over each other. Wide horizons of meaning and connections start opening up all over the place. All connected to that one four letter word: Wine.

The wine has run out. And there is more happening here than a party running dry.

At every wedding a covenant is made, a covenant of love between two people. In scripture, that covenant is seen to mirror the covenant of God with his people. And that’s why every wedding banquet should be the mirror image of the great wedding banquet at the end of time that Isaiah, some of the other prophets and psalms picture when they talk about God’s Kingdom. A feast that also appears in Revelations as the fulfilment of God’s journey with us.

Everywhere in the bible wine is a symbol of that great feast, a foretaste of what is to come.

And now, at this wedding, with Jesus attending, the wine has run out and there is only water left.

Water

Water was, in the language and symbolism of the bible, connected with the way God puts limits on

the third day of creation. Water is the stuff people drown in, the place where in biblical times people imagined the Leviathan lived, the monster of the deep who could drag you straight into the underworld below if he got half a chance. In the journey of God with his people it is presented as a test of faith that needs to be braved and travelled through, as well as a substance that cleans and purifies (See the stories of Noah, of the Exodus, and some of the references to water in the books of the prophets). In the book of Revelations that threat is referred to when it is said that in God's Kingdom the sea will be no more. All these connections come together when we enter the waters of baptism, a seal and sign that God wants to make us, cleansed and purified, partners of his covenant. And that will guide us through even the deepest waters of despair and death to safety and dry land.

Water, however, does not only have that dark, threatening and destructive side to it. It also has the potential to become a source of life, nurture and abundance. And that's why the Jewish tradition not only regarded it as a symbol of death, it also saw it as a symbol for the life-giving law. And I suppose, when you think about it, that makes sense: as much as living according to God's guidance will give life, the law can become an instrument of death in the hands of the wrong people.

The wine has run out and there is only water left.

Jesus does not act immediately when Mary approaches him. It looks like the time has to be right for God to kickstart the party again. The wine of the Kingdom is not something that can be taken for granted. There is a time for miracles to happen, and sometimes we have to wait. Before God nudges us into the right direction, we're given another chance to work on it, to sort out by ourselves what is needed.

Running on empty

When Jesus turns to the caterers who are responsible for the party, he asks them to fill the jars of water at the door. Jars that were put there for people to wash their hands and feet when they arrived. These jars are no longer full.

They should have been.

That's what the law said. Six stone jars full. Just as there are six days necessary to get to the sabbath, six full jars of water are to be present at the entrance to a feast. There has been neglect. Have they been careless? Did they think a little bit less would do? Have they been busy? Or did they think everyone had arrived anyway and nobody would notice?

Six in the Jewish tradition is the number that stands for creation, water the symbol of the life-giving law. The six jars filled with water together indicate what is necessary to make the wine of the Kingdom flow in abundance. This is what we can hear John say between the lines: "Don't be surprised if the party gets interrupted if your (created) life is not filled to the brim with what God asks you to do. Don't be surprised if the feast of God's Kingdom stalls if your life is not full living water. As soon as the jars are filled the feast continues with wine in abundance. All Jesus does is ask for the jars to be filled, he doesn't use any magic formula, he does or says nothing more than: "Fill the jars and start ladling".

Water turns into wine, God's covenant with his people continues to be celebrated where human creatures fulfill the law until the last drop. And then God is no scrooge.

Six hundred litres of wine for a village wedding that is already half way over is more than plenty. Indicating that in Christ, God offers more than enough life-giving, soul-uplifting abundance to

anyone. That there is more than we can manage if we keep the jars of creation filled with our obedience to God's life-giving guidance.

How often does it happen that we run on empty? Because of negligence, carelessness, busyness, or because we thought a little bit less might do? How often do we find ourselves whispering to God that we are running out, with the Church, in our lives, with our faith. And what do we then do to change that? Do we make sure we keep our jars filled to the brim? Are we prepared to put some work in? Or do we reckon faith is a one way street where a whisper about a perceived need should be enough for God to start working miracles?

When our lives dry up, when there is only darkness and despair as far as we can see, and our faith starts to falter, it is good to remember that God can change the stuff of our worst nightmares into rich, abundant, nurturing, life-producing liquid that has the power to transform ordinary, dogged, seemingly pointless faithfulness into rivers of joy and grace. Amen.