



The wedding at Cana: revealing the transformational nature of Christ

Sermon preached at St Marylebone Parish Church on 20th January 2019 (week of Prayer for Christian Unity) by the Revd Peter Cornick, Superintendent, West London Mission

It's a great pleasure to address you this morning – not least in this moment in the Christian calendar, the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity. And in this season of epiphany – a moment of reflection on the revelations of God through Christ Jesus: the visit of the Magi; the baptism of Jesus; and now, the wedding at Cana.

First, may I introduce myself. I am the new Superintendent minister of the West London Mission, and a minister at Hinde Street Methodist Church. The West London Mission is the Circuit of which Hinde Street Church is a part.

The challenge of central London ministry is a new one. Although, London and indeed, Hinde Street Methodist Church, is not new to me. I worshipped there as a student and volunteered for a year at the Seymour Place day centre for homeless people, some thirty years ago! It feels, to a certain degree, like coming back home!

It's all rather different from my previous appointment. For twelve years, I was Superintendent minister supervising churches in the Winchester, Eastleigh and Romsey area. Of the sixteen churches, some were in the middle of the New Forest, whilst I ran a large town church with a bustling community centre.

I've spent quite a lot of time in my first few months, visiting the projects run by the West London Mission. It operates several housing and community services, dealing with people affected by homelessness and other trauma in life.

1. I met Bob, not his real name, at a residential home for ex-service men. Some in the home have suffered post-traumatic stress disorder, found adjusting to civilian life complicated, and ended up homeless or drifting from family. Bob had been afflicted by addictions and slept rough. He described to me how the house in Burgess Park had transformed his life – given him security, hope and straightened him out. Now, he has a job, and is looking to move to his own flat.
2. George, not his real name, is an alcoholic. He lives at our project near Finsbury Park where men can still drink alcohol, almost on prescription. It is a wet house – which I'd never heard of before. The idea is, the men can reduce their intake, under the watchful care of the staff. George described to me how he lost his job, and became estranged from his family. 'This place has changed my life', he said. I'm on the road to recovery. He wanted to thank me – I hadn't done anything – but the staff and chaplain and counsellors had.
3. And then, I was at a church function, elsewhere in London, not particularly thinking I would meet anyone who had experienced the projects of the WLM. I got talking to a smartly dressed and well-spoken man. When he discovered I was the superintendent of the West London Mission, he went into the kind of daze someone enters as memory takes control of the present. He remembered being, as he put it 'down on his luck'. 'The Day Centre helped me' he said – 'yes – they were very good to me.' I was intrigued to hear more of his story, but he moved away – perhaps my presence had evoked too many painful memories – the reasons he needed to visit the centre in Seymour Place. But his life had clearly been transformed.

That's a snapshot of conversations I've heard in my first few months. As I visit, I see lives transformed by the work of WLM, inspired by the Christian ethic of serving the most vulnerable, lives transformed because of the presence of Christ.

And so, to the wedding at Cana. If I can sum up this unique passage in one word, it would be 'transformational.'

11 Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Jesus, together with his disciples, has been invited to a wedding. It takes place in Cana, in Galilee and Jesus gets into a conversation with his mother regarding the wine running out. Jesus' first response seems odd, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?' But it describes the purpose of the passage. Jesus' concern is about God's purposes – not wine running out. In fact, John's Gospel is about glory or glorification. And this culminates in the cross and resurrection. All things lead to this graphic account of how God – in Jesus – cannot be annihilated – God will be present, will rise and will transform the situation, however appalling. For John the gospel writer, this is glory or glorification.

So, here, in Cana, at the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus says: 'My hour has not yet come.' The hour of my glory. The hour when I demonstrate transformational love, is still in the distance. But in Cana, here is a sign of that glory to come. Where there is no wine, where there is emptiness, where it seems as if God might have abandoned the people, there is now abundant wine, enough for many celebrations. Jesus has transformed the situation.

There is something about the understated way in which Jesus is invited to this wedding – he is not the entertainment, nor is it a society 'do' – this is the back water of Cana. An ordinary occasion is transformed by Jesus with ordinary water into the finest wine ... here is ordinary bread and wine, it will become for us, the body and blood of Christ.

The problem with the text though, is the way some sermons end up replacing the old water for the new wine – Christianity replacing Judaism. Today, whilst I clearly follow Christ, such a conclusion from the text feels somewhat uncomfortable. Now, John, writing at the height of the conflict between those, like Saul, who were trying to prevent the split within Judaism by the followers of Jesus, might well have wanted to emphasise Christ's Way. Is John being polemical?

But, the Jesus of the time would have known nothing about the eventual split. His purpose, as I read it, was to re-present God's ways to his own people – he stood in the reforming and re-interpreting tradition of rabbinic Judaism. He was the fulfilment of all that God had promised to Abraham and his seed.

In the week of prayer for Christian unity, I stand, as a Methodist, in the tradition of John Wesley – an Anglican clergyman who wanted to transform the lives of miners and farm labourers. He travelled outside the parish system to do so, establishing local societies which in turn challenged the authority of the local Priests. He had no intention of establishing a church but was an enthusiastic reformer.

Today, our two churches speak of uniting our ministries – at a complexity and speed which renders Brexit a short and simple conversation. Unity of ministries would be welcome, transformational even – but will – like Brexit – require compromise – from both churches.

This sign, for John, is not really about the mechanics of water into wine, or the struggles of the emerging Christian faith from within Judaism. It is about signalling glory – revealing the transformational glory of God bringing new life from death, and the transformational presence of Jesus in the ordinariness of life, for God's purposes.

This sign is about disciples believing transformation is possible, and witnessing to it, even amongst the most ordinary and broken people in society, because of the presence of Christ.