

## Water into wine (John 2.1-11)

### Sermon given by Garth Raybould on 17 January 2010

The story of Jesus turning water into wine is one of the best known Bible stories and it's also one of the richest for those who want to do theological analysis on the miracles of Jesus. There are very many interpretations at all sorts of levels, ranging from the simple symbolism of the sheer volume of wine, representing God's abundant generosity, to highly theological interpretation of every single word of the account. One commentator tells us that the story "indicates the profound theological meaning involved in the whole ministry of signs." There are allusions to the Old Testament, to Rabbinic thought and literature, to Greek philosophy and of course to early Christian ideas about the meaning of the water of baptism and the wine at the Last Supper. There's theology about Christ being the true bridegroom – the husband of the new Israel. There's theology about Jesus' strange words to his mother, about why there are six stone jars and not seven, about why they were filled to the brim, about the symbolism of the servants and the steward and the disciples. This morning I'd like to unpack each of these ideas one by one. Fortunately for you we don't have time.

The thing that most strikes me about this story is that it's about pure enjoyment. Jesus works a miracle that has no other purpose but to help people to enjoy themselves at a party. Yes, there's compassion as well, because the bride and groom and their families would have been humiliated if the wine had run out, on what was probably the first day of a week of celebrations. But primarily this is a story about people having a good time, and in the culture of the time having a good time meant having some wine. The rabbis had a saying – "Without wine there is no joy." I can go along with that. Of course, I don't want to deny the devastating effects of alcoholism, and nor, I'm sure, did the rabbis – in fact wine was usually drunk in a very dilute form – but still I like the general idea.

Even today there are some Christians who think it's a little bit wrong somehow to enjoy yourself, to have a good time, whether in church or in day-to-day life. When I was a boy, going to church certainly seemed to involve dark clothes and being quite serious. And of course in the Methodist Church there wasn't a great deal of wine-drinking. Traces of that slightly Puritanical mindset hang on. A couple of years ago I went to hear John Sentamu give the Archbishop Blanche memorial lecture in Liverpool. He was very good and I came out feeling uplifted. I said to someone, a retired clergyman in fact, "I really enjoyed that – did you?" He said, "Well, it was very good, but I wouldn't say I enjoyed it, in the same way I don't go to church to enjoy myself." What's that all about? Sometimes, I know, it's necessary to be solemn, but that doesn't stop you enjoying yourself.

Enjoyment means finding joy in something. The angel sang "I bring you good news of great joy that will come to all people." Later in this Gospel Jesus says, "I have told you these things so that my joy will stay with you, that your joy might be full." Luke tells us that after the Ascension the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually praising God. Paul writes that the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace and so on. Joy – enjoyment – suffuses the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Worshipping and serving God is not just a duty – in our Communion service we say "It is our duty and our joy, at all times and in all places, to give you thanks and praise. God wants us to have a good time, to enjoy ourselves, to find true joy, in all the ways that are available to us.

But how can we speak of joy in the face of disaster? Where is the joy in the disaster we have seen this week in Haiti – not just the earthquake but the length of time the people there have had to wait for relief? Where is the joy in the disasters and disappointments of our personal lives?

It's tempting to look for easy answers to problems like that. It would be nice to say, as the American evangelist Pat Robertson apparently does, that the people of Haiti have brought one disaster after another on themselves because years ago they turned against God and made a pact with the devil to escape from French rule. Perhaps that seems to Mr Robertson a fine bit of Old Testament theology. But it's wrong, and wrong on so many levels. For a start it's wrong in terms of the Old Testament relationship between God and his people, which was one of repeated forgiveness

and compassion, no matter what we might hear or read about an Old Testament “God of Wrath”. And it’s certainly wrong according to the teaching and example we have from Jesus. Luke tells us that Jesus talked about two disasters that were evidently topical – the slaughter of some Galileans by Roman soldiers and the collapse of a tower at Siloam that killed 18 people. One an act of human violence, the other a sort of natural disaster. Jesus said, “Do you think those people were killed because they were more sinful than other people? I tell you, no!” He made it quite clear God doesn’t act in that random way.

It would be nice to say, OK, perhaps God wasn’t punishing Haiti but it was still their own fault because we have science and technology now and we know where the earthquake lines are – people just shouldn’t live where earthquakes are going to happen. I must admit it’s tempting to criticise the Californians for constantly building new real estate in an area where a major quake is certain to happen some day, but in Haiti - do we expect millions of the poorest people on earth to up sticks and move somewhere else? And where to?

It would be nice to say that suffering is a way that some people come closer to God. There’s an old saying that suffering ennobles, that Somerset Maugham famously railed against. Even in our own scriptures, Paul writes that “as God’s servants we try to recommend ourselves in all circumstances by our steadfast endurance: in distress, hardships and dire straits; flogged, imprisoned, mobbed, overworked, sleepless, starving.” Jesus himself tells us that we must take up our cross if we are to follow him. In our own community we all know people who stay cheerful through the most difficult times. But the suffering we see in Haiti has nothing to do with following Christ. Yes, some people there are singing hymns and praying and asking for prayers, and there have been some miracles of survival, but for every one of those there are probably thousands of people who have no sense at all of God’s presence in the situation.

These are the sorts of easy answers that Giles Fraser described on the radio on Friday as “designed to let God off the hook”. As Christians we don’t want to find God at fault – in fact we don’t want to believe that he can be at fault. But God requires that we love him with our minds as well as with our hearts and souls and strength. That means we need to have intellectual honesty and not kid ourselves that answers like these are right.

The best we can say, by way of any sort of explanation of extreme suffering, is that God sees a bigger picture, where the suffering is not wanted but is somehow inevitable, necessary in a way we just can’t understand. But even that seems like a cop-out at times like this. What sort of big picture is it that can possibly justify suffering on the scale that we see today in Haiti? What sort of big picture contains such unimaginable horror? Not one, surely, that sits easily with our human understanding of God as compassionate and merciful.

So it’s difficult. All we can say, in the end, is that we are a people of faith – we are a faith community. We believe in God though we don’t understand all his ways. We believe in him because we have seen him in the life and work and resurrection of Jesus. We believe in him because we have seen great works done in his name. We believe in him because we have felt him at work in our own lives. We believe in him because we have hope, and we know that without him we have no hope of a better future, either in this life or in the next. Faith, as Paul tells us, is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. So we have faith.

And having faith, we do what we can to ease the suffering of the people affected by the disaster. This is where God is in the situation – in the people who drop everything to go and help with the search and rescue, the medical people, the ones who help to clear away the bodies and the debris, the ones who get the airports and the utilities up and running again. And the people who send money, and the people who pray. And there will be many who help but say they don’t believe in God, but we who are Christians know that everything that’s good comes from him.

Mary had faith. In the language of Jesus, the words he spoke to his mother when she told him the wine was running out are not as harsh as they appear in our translation: “Dear woman, why do you

involve me?” But they do imply he’s not going to do anything about the problem. Yet Mary still said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” And the result was that Jesus turned a local wedding feast into one of the most famous events in history and – more than that – a symbol for the kingdom of Heaven, a symbol of perpetual joy.

When at last we can say that we remain joyful through all our problems, that we give thanks in all the circumstances of our lives for the gift of life itself and for the feast to come, then we can truly say we are one with Christ.