

JOHN 2:1-11
HIDDEN MAJESTY!

“Will the real Jesus please stand up?” This is the title of a radio debate that took place in the USA in 1995 (I think), but was recently posted on YouTube! “Who is Jesus?” was the question that they debated. There is a deal of confusion about the answer to that question; we’re not exactly sure of the answer, it would seem. The Church headlines this week have all been about politics and education and the Church of Scotland’s attitude to religious observance in schools and that’s an important issue, but here’s a more fundamental question that we need to answer – “who is Jesus?” If someone asked you that question tomorrow in the Co-op would you be able to give them a reasoned and reasonable answer? Or would you say, embarrassed, “I don’t know!” Let’s set about trying to answer that question – “who is Jesus?” by going back to the gospels, to the evidence, to the source documents for the Christian faith and listen afresh to John as he tells the stories of Jesus.

John’s gospel is the last of the four gospels to be written and is quite different from the others. John tells some of the same stories of Jesus, but some of the stories John tells, only John tells. He also tells us much more of Jesus’ teaching and there are huge pieces towards the end of the gospel that only John records, much of it featuring the night before Jesus died. Towards the end of the gospel John tells us why he’s taken the time and the trouble to write these things down: “*Jesus did...*” (*John 20:30f*) There are two reasons: first of all, there is something to believe about Jesus, that He is God’s Son, the Messiah; in other words that “He is who He claimed to be and something of what you read, dear reader, will persuade you of these truths about Jesus”; secondly, something to gain from believing, “*life...*” - ‘life’ is one of John’s great themes and Jesus brings life, abundant life; eternal life; life that is more than what we eat, drink, wear, possess; life in relationship with God; life that has grace, peace and hope as its key qualities – life that Jesus gives and life is found in reading these stories. “Will the real Jesus please stand up?” When He does, we are offered life and called to faith.

The first of these stories takes us to a family wedding. Well, we presume that it was a family wedding because we’re not actually told the details that we want to ask: whose wedding was it? Why was Jesus there? Who was with Him? What happened? We know that the wedding took place in Cana, in Galilee, a village somewhere North of Nazareth; so Jesus is in home territory here and it is entirely likely that the wedding is of some family member and He’s been invited and His mother is there and some of His friends and disciples because they come from Galilee too! These weddings could run for about a week, day after day of celebrations. But something goes wrong: the wine runs out! It might not seem too serious to us because we’d simply go out and buy some more, but this is serious. In a society which took hospitality far more seriously than we do and for this to happen is a serious social faux pas; someone suggested that law suits had resulted from similar such happenings. “*When...*” (*John 2:3*)

Jesus’ reply sounds just a tad grumpy: “*Dear woman...*” (*John 2:4*) For Mary, it was the most natural thing in world to ask Jesus to solve the problem; He’s probably been doing it for years at home, and now she lays this new need before Him. But “Dear Woman” (which is softer than it first reads) suggests that Jesus’ relationship with His mother is changing. Someone suggests that this relationship has taken a new turn since Jesus has begun His ministry; it is still special, but because of Jesus’ mission it has changed somewhat and Mary “responds as a believer and her faith in Jesus is honoured.” “*Do whatever...*” (*John 2:5*) words that show total trust, complete faith; she knows that Jesus can deal with this.

The stone water jars in the corner were huge, 20 to 30 gallons each they held. These jars were there for a purpose: the water was for ceremonial cleansing. Jews had to be clean to take part in religious ceremonial rituals and this is not drinking water or health and hygiene water, but religious cleansing water. They had to wash their hands several times in the day to make sure that they were clean from the world and its impurities; that water is stored in these huge jars. This is not water for drinking, but is religious, ceremonial water. Jesus has the servants fill these jars with water and it is this water that Jesus takes and does – what? *“Now draw...”* (John 2:8f) To the bridegroom: he is commended on the best wine of wedding, that he’s kept till last; I suspect he was completely confused! To the maitre d’, he had found the best wine of the week and his life was saved by this wine, even though he didn’t know where it had come from. To the servants, did they see it as some kind of magic trick? It has gone in as water, but come out as wine, in the kind of trick that Dynamo does on TV on a Saturday night? Were they talking to each other about it for weeks afterwards?

For John it is a sign: *“This, the...”* (John 2:11) The other gospels simply describe the miracles as works of power; John calls them signs. A “sign” is something that is not meant to draw attention to itself, but is to point the reader beyond itself to something else, something more important. If you are travelling to Edinburgh, you will see lots of road signs pointing to the city and telling you how to get here, but you don’t stop at the first road sign; otherwise you’d still be in London. The purpose of the sign is to point us to the place, to a greater reality than itself. For John this is more than the simple changing of water into wine; it is a sign pointing us to a greater, deeper reality. The question is what? What was John wanting us to see when he wrote this story into his gospel? To what is he pointing us by telling us this story?

1. Jesus’ glory: *“This, the...”* (John 2:11) There’s a fantastic little quo from Wm Temple: “The modest water saw its God and blushed.” The first time I read that it seemed silly and simplistic, but it is actually quite clever. Jesus revealed His glory for the first time, but only to a small group of people. Who saw this glory? Only His mother and a few other people, it would seem. The bridegroom didn’t see, nor the maitre d’, nor the servants; just a few people realised what Jesus had done and understood. They understood that something of the power and glory of God was here in their midst, that in Jesus, the presence and power of God stood in a little house in Cana; they understood that something of the power and energy of God was at work in front of them. They saw Jesus’ glory in this sign and *“they put...”* There was still more to see; there were more questions than answers, but this first sign began to point them to something special about Jesus: He is the Son of God, Messiah, Saviour – they didn’t see all of that after one sign, but they were beginning to be pointed in that direction.

2. Jesus’ power to transform – this is slightly more complicated but it centres round the water jars. These jars were part of the whole religious ritual of the day, part of the religion of the law led by the Pharisees. There were all kinds of rules and regulations in that religious ritual and hand-washing was one of them. We see elsewhere that Jesus talks about it as religion full of ritual but empty of power. So these water jars stand for a religion of law that could point the way for us to be pure people, but could not achieve it; all it could offer were repeated rituals, which were no good to a conscience burdened by sin, guilt and failure. The jars stood for a religion that could point us on the right road, but not help us get there; it had no power to change our lives. Then jars stood for a religion that would persuade us to follow by inducing guilt in our hearts and minds. Jesus takes these jars, fills them with water and transforms that water into wine, takes what is old water and changes it into the new wine of the kingdom of God.

When I read this story, I can't help but be drawn to Isaiah 55 and the fantastic picture of the feast that he paints. "*Come buy...*" (Is 55:1-3) Here is wine, milk, bread, a great feast spread out for us and we are invited to come to taste and eat and be satisfied. This great feast will satisfy your soul; you will leave the table full. This is a picture of the blessing that God offers to us when we listen to Him and believe. For me this is the contrast that stands at the heart of the sign: the old, dead ritual that has no power to change my weary, sinful life, is contrasted with the offer that God makes to bless us and that is complete when Jesus came. Jesus has the power to transform my life. Sin, guilt, failure, are transformed by Jesus into a new way of being with hope, grace, peace, forgiveness. These are the key qualities of His kingship; these are the blessings of God for us as we believe in Jesus. Jesus has come to transform the world. Water into wine at a wedding is a sign of that transforming power.

People are walking away from institutional religion in their droves in Scotland today. The Church has offered religion that is more about ritual than substance, that is often dull and obscure to people, that has sentimental little homilies about being a good person. We have told people what their problems are and told them we share these problems, but we have not always pointed them to the solution. We have talked down and explained away the miracles to make our religion more appealing to the masses.

Will the real Jesus please stand up? Who is this real Jesus? We will see more answers to that question in the next few weeks, but the first answer... Well, first of all we have to deal with His power to do the miracles, that the power of heaven has broken into our world to do things we can't explain, that here is someone beyond our power to explain, someone bigger than us, the Son of God, God present in our world, the glory of God revealed momentarily and then hidden again. Then we have to be confronted by someone with the power to transform our lives, for whom life is about a free feast of bread, wine and milk, about the blessing of God and who challenges us to believe in Him with our heart and soul, so that this is no longer a religious ritual, but a living faith, trusting in Jesus, enjoying Him and His grace.

"What is my life for?" This is one of these big questions we don't ask often, but from time to time. Life is for enjoying Jesus and enjoying Jesus will help us enjoy every other part of life better too! Is that too simple for you? But that's what this sign is all about – the focus is on Jesus! Christianity is the fastest growing world faith – why? People are discovering Jesus for themselves and are putting their faith in Him. What is our mission as His Church? To offer Jesus to people; to tell people the stories of Jesus, to share something of this real Jesus so that they can believe and find life in His name. People may be walking away from institutional religion, but the person of Jesus is still drawing people to faith. Will the real Jesus please stand up?