Wedding at Cana
John 2:1-12

We're looking at John's gospel, one of the four accounts in the Bible of Jesus' life. And today we're looking at this wedding he attended.

And one of the joys of being a pastor is that you get invited to lots of weddings. And you can call me an old softie, but everyone of those is special. And yet, every wedding's the same - because while each couple is unique, and their story is unique, they don't get to re-invent what marriage is. It's why Christian weddings begin with how God has instituted marriage, and how Jesus gave it his seal of approval by attending this wedding.

And yet, look what John writes: v11, 'This, *the first of his signs*, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory.'

Now, when you go and visit a museum, or a city, you don't stop at the signpost in the street that's pointing you in the right direction and say, 'yeh, we made it! What a great place this is! Let's take a photo and go home' do you? Or, if you're out on a hike and you want to get to a peak, and there's a sign at the bottom pointing out the path, and telling you how long it's going to take to to get there, you don't say, 'phew, made it, that was hard' take a selfie and get back in the car.

Why? Because a sign is not the thing itself, it's pointing you beyond itself to the real thing. So in calling what goes on here a *sign*, John wants you to see that this is more than about weddings and wine. That there's something about this event that tells you who Jesus is and why he is glorious.

And right at the start, John gives you a hint of what that is. Verse 1: '*On the third day* there was a wedding.' Third day from what? Well, if you look back at chapter 1, John's carefully documented what happens on what day. And this account of the start of Jesus's ministry obviously begins on day 1. Then in v29, John says, 'the next day' which is day 2, then v35, 'the next day' - day 3; then v43, 'the next day' - day 4. And now, verse 1 of chapter 2, 'on the third day' - the 3rd day after the 4th day - which is the 7th day.

And in the Bible 7 is the number for completeness and fullness, and in the days of the week, it's the Sabbath, the day of rest.

But what has *that* got to do with weddings and wine? Well, we're going to look at 3 things: what are you looking to to satisfy you? What happens when that fails? And how this passage tells you what will never fail.

In Search of Satisfaction
Verse 1 again, 'On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, *and the mother of Jesus was there*.'

Now, when you're planning a wedding, getting your catering and serving team sorted is crucial, isn't it. And maybe Mary, Jesus' mother, given her concern later about the wine running out, was on that team. Or maybe this was a family affair, because, v2, 'Jesus was also invited to the wedding.'

But whatever the reason that Jesus, his mother, and disciples are there, we know why the couple getting married are there. Like every young couple, they're thinking, hoping, that finding and marrying this one, will complete me. That to be known and loved will satisfy me. And, maybe, starting a family will fulfil me.

Let me ask you, what are you looking to for those things? What are you looking to to complete you, satisfy you, fulfil you? What do you think will do it for you? And maybe for you it is a special relationship, or marriage, or family, or something else.

But, if you notice, standing over there in the corner of this wedding venue are 6 massive stone jars, and John tells us they're there, v6, 'for the Jewish rites of purification.' So this young couple and their families are culturally conservative. They're doing this by the book. And before eating, they and their guests are going to keep the religious law, and wash themselves and make themselves ceremonially clean. Because what better way to start your married life, and earn God's favour upon you, than to do things right, and be pure.

And if you've been brought up in a religious or conservative background, your culture will have told you, that's the way to find satisfaction and fulfilment in life: Go to church, don't have sex until you're married, but *do* get married, and then have lots of sex, and lots of children, and obey the rules, and wash your hands in the water jars, and God will bless you.

But of course it's not just the religious who think that obeying the rules is the key to a good life. What if instead of washing your hands in the right jar, it's recycling your waste in the right container, or digging a well, or twinning a toilet, or joining a march, or using the right pronoun? You see, those on the left also think that rule keeping and conformity is the key to a fulfilled life - it's just a different set of rules.

But maybe for you it's neither marriage nor rule-keeping. For you, the path to feeling like you've made it in life is to enjoy the single life, and travel the world, and pursue adventure, and stay free of constraints.

Or maybe, it's to break the rules and smash the jars, and be done with marriage and family and religion, because you're the one who gets to decide what you do with your life. And what right does anyone else have to tell you your hands need washing?

So, whichever path we choose - washing our hands in the jars and obeying the rules, ignoring the jars and pursuing our own path, or smashing the jars and breaking the rules, we're all seeking satisfaction in life, that sense of fullness and completeness that we're living life. And wanting, and finding, and marrying a partner are just some examples of that.

The question is, what happens if that thing you thought would fulfil you fails you?

When the Wine Runs Out

Now, in our garage, we've got multiple bottles of the same make of red wine. Which, given Su and I don't drink a lot is surprising. The reason is, they're left overs from our daughter Katie's wedding. Because if getting the catering team organised is crucial, making sure there's enough drink to go round is too. And you'd rather have stuff left over, than run out.

So pity this young couple: v3, 'When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "they have no wine."' Awkward enough now, but back then, securing a good financial future for your daughter was a matter of honour. And for the groom and his family not to have bought, or worse, not been able to afford enough wine, would have been shameful. This has the power, not just to spoil their day, but their lives: 'they're the ones whose wine ran out.'

But if you think about it, whatever if you're looking to to fulfil you, satisfy you, complete you, lift your head up, in the end - the wine always runs out.

Maybe you think that by marrying that special other life is going to be fantastic, until you wake up one morning and realise they're not so special or life is not so fantastic. Maybe what fills your tank is travel, and visiting the best places, but you lose your job and the money runs dry. Maybe you pour your life into your career, because you genuinely find it satisfying, but then you retire, and you're left empty.

Or maybe you've sought fulfilment in doing the right things, investing yourself in your faith, and church activities, or Christian commitment, but life happens, wounds accumulate, doubts grow and you wonder 'Am I just wasting my life?'

Or maybe you've sought fulfilment in what others think of you. You've worked hard to please them, to get a good reputation. But you screw up, or fall short, or someone else does something and it reflects badly on you.

Whether it's marriage, or family, or career, or pleasure, or the opinion of others - sooner or later, the wine runs out.

Or maybe it's never started flowing in the first place. Maybe you want to get married but you're still single. Maybe you had dreams for your job but it's anything but fulfilling. Maybe you want adventure and your friends are getting it but you can't afford it. And life doesn't taste like a great wine. It tastes more like lemon juice.

And if this young couple are in danger of being shamed, you look at the lives of others, with their great careers, or great marriages, or great families, or great instagram experiences, and you'd never say you felt shame but it sure feels like your bottle is empty.

Now, having been pregnant and unmarried in an honour/shame culture, maybe Mary was especially sensitive to the shame this couple were on the verge of experiencing. And she siddles up to Jesus and clearly expects him to do something.

But look at his response. Verse 4, 'And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me?"'

Now, last week on holiday, we were sat on a beach, with an English couple nearby. And we heard the husband go, 'wife, come here wife'. And once we were out of ear shot, my girls suggested I speak to Su like that, and see how it goes. Let's just say it didn't last long!

And some translations try to soften what Jesus says here, and they have him saying, 'dear woman', not just 'woman'. But it's never a good idea to try and sanitise Jesus. And while what he says is not rude, it is at least abrupt, and there is at least a hint of rebuke in it.

Why? John Calvin the great reformer asks, 'Why does Christ rebuff her so sternly?' Because as he points out, she's almost certainly just trying to save this young couple and their families, who are likely poor, from social embarrassment.

So why does he speak like this? He's deliberately putting distance between himself and her. And as his work and ministry begin, there's no inside track for his mum; no nepotism; no presuming on family ties. She too will have to approach him like everyone else.

And maybe the fact that she's not going to have the kind of relationship with her son that other mothers had with theirs, is part of what Simeon said to her in the temple, as he held Jesus as a baby, that 'a sword will pierce through your own soul also.'

But look again at what Jesus says: 'What does this have to do with me?' (v4). Here is a couple whose biggest day is about to come crashing down, and does Jesus not care? Does he just shrug his shoulders and say, not my problem, woman.

Maybe you know what that feels like. Maybe you're single and wish you weren't. Maybe you're stuck in a job you hate or your marriage is hard. Maybe you feel like you're running on empty or your life is empty. And you pray, 'God I need your help' and it feels like what you get is a shrug of the shoulders and 'what's your problem got to do with me?' And so to all your other problems is added the feeling that God has let you down and failed to deliver. But you've kept your side of the bargain, and kept the rules, and washed your hands in those stone jars, and now has he run out on you?

But of course, that's not how the story ends.

The Founder of the Feast

Verse 5, 'His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."' So she may not be able to twist his arm as his mother, but she still trusts him to do the right thing. And like the Canaanite woman who comes to Jesus asking him to heal her daughter, or the widow in Jesus' parable, knocking on the door of the unjust judge, Mary won't be put off. She knows that she can leave this in his hands because she knows he will always do what is right.

Do you know what she knows - because John says you can.

And he turns our attention to those stone jars: v6-7, 'Now there were six stone jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them to the brim.'

Later on, John is going to tell us about a time when another Mary anoints Jesus with an expensive perfume, and the house was filled with the smell. It's as if years later he can still smell it. And here, he can still see the jars filled to the brim, with the water brimming over. They're the kind of unnecessary eyewitness details that tell you, John really did see and smell these things happening.

And then Jesus tells them to draw some off and take it to the master of the feast, v8-9, 'So they took it. When the master of the feast tasted the water *now become wine*, and did not know where it came from… the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now."'

He's like a blind taster at a wine-tasting event, isn't he? But when he puts it to his lips, he knows what he's tasting! Now, we have an unwritten policy in the Slack household that we don't buy a

bottle of wine for more than 5 francs. But if you invite us to dinner and we bring a bottle we might increase that to 6. But this is no 5 franc bottle. This is the best! And there are 600 litres of it!

And when a young couple gets married there's always this pressure that their wedding has to be at least as good as their friends. But this young couple who moments ago were staring shame in the face, will now be remembered as the ones who served this incredible vintage - 'where did they get it from?! And it wasn't just a bottle a table, there was gallons of it!'

But maybe you're sat there thinking 'You can't turn water into wine. This is make believe.' Well, on April 1st in 407AD, Augustine preached on this passage and addresses just this issue. And CS Lewis, picks it up in his book *Miracles*. And that is, that God does this miracle every year. And every time you drink a glass of wine you're experiencing it. Because every year, the rain falls, the vines grow, the grapes mature and at harvest, water is turned into wine. And are you saying God can't speed that process up?

And here is Jesus doing it to save a young couple from shame. And they, and the master of the feast and all the guests get to taste the abundance Jesus offers. And from the Garden of Eden on, Satan, the deceiver has wanted you to think that God is withholding the best from you. But here is Jesus saying, 'no, I'm the One who brings you abundant joy.'

And yet, this is a sign. It's pointing beyond this couple and beyond this wedding and beyond this wine. So what's it pointing to?

Well, look again at the stone jars. They're like symbols of the Old Testament law. Obey the rules and you'll be clean. But what Israel discovered is that they never could obey the rules. It's what any of us discover when we try to make ourselves good, or right, or clean. We keep failing. But as Jesus fills up the jars, he's saying that in him the law is being fulfilled. That he's the one who perfectly keeps it - the only one who ever could. It's in him that you can be truly cleansed; in him that you can be made pure; in him that you can receive the favour and blessing of God. And just like the wine runs out, so in Jesus the law, with its demands and its condemnation of you, has run out. And out of the old, Jesus is bringing something new.

Because it's not just the laws he's fulfilling. The Old Testament prophets spoke of a time when a king would come from Judah - and his vines would yield a harvest so great he could tie his donkey to them and not worry about the donkey eating all the grapes - because the harvest and the vintage was going to be so great! (Gen 49:8-12). And the mountains would flow with wine (Amos 9:13-14). And as Jesus fills those jars and turns gallons of water into wine, he's saying, all those prophecies of overflowing abundance and endless joy are being fulfilled in me.

And yet, look again at what he says to his mother: v4, "*My hour has not yet come*." What does he mean by that? Does he mean he's waiting for the right moment, for the nod from his heavenly Father, and that there's a lesson to be learned by Mary and us in the waiting? Maybe. And maybe if you're in a period of waiting you need to know that his timing is perfect.

Except, there are numerous other times when Jesus refers to 'my hour' or 'the hour' and every time it refers to death. And they culminate on the night of his betrayal as he prays, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you" (John 17:1).

So why would Jesus be sat at a wedding and be thinking about his death?

Because the One who went to a wedding came into the world for a wedding.

You see, in the Old Testament, the covenant between God and his people is repeatedly pictured as a marriage. And God is the husband, and his people are his bride. And later on John the Baptist will describe Jesus as the bridegroom who has come for his bride. And so, as he's sat at this wedding feast, Jesus is thinking of his own wedding to come. Of how he'll win his bride, at the cost of his life. How the wine he'll provide there will be his blood. Because if here the wine spills over those stone jars, at the cross his blood will spill from his head and hands and feet and side.

Do you know how much Christ loves you?

When I conduct weddings, one of *the* most special moment is when the bride comes down the aisle, because she's invariably beautiful. And I've got one eye on her, and one on the bridegroom, because as he sees her for the first time, dressed in white, knowing that she is his, he almost invariably struggles to hold it together.

Jesus didn't just shed tears to make you his, he shed his blood. And this wedding, and this wine, this signpost is pointing you to the One so lavish, who loves you so much, that he pours himself out to win you to himself. That as a bride is arrayed in beautiful white so he washes you clean, and makes you pure, and robes you in his righteousness - all at the cost of his life. Take, drink, this is my blood, shed for you.

So this isn't just fulfilling the Old Testament laws, or prophecies. It's that he and only he can fill your heart. That he and only he can truly satisfy you. And he will never run out. And as this happens on the 7th day, it's in him that your restless heart can find rest, that your sense of incompleteness can be made whole, and your thirsty soul can find drink.

So John wants you to see: the way to fullness of life is not by obeying the rules, or breaking the rules, it's by the overflowing, lavish grace of God in Christ. And it's in him that all your deepest desires, to be known and loved, to be seen and heard, to experience freedom in life and purpose in work, are truly met.

And as you realise that, something strange begins to happen. It's not just water that changes, it's you. You could never fully obey God's law, but Jesus has done it for you. And he's changed law to grace, at infinite cost to himself. And when you get that, it changes your heart. And before you might have obeyed reluctantly, because you had to, because that's what good people do, but now you do it with joy. Not to earn his favour but because you already have it. And duty becomes delight.

And when Mary says to the servants "do whatever he tells you" you realise, 'you know what, she's right. He's done everything for me, so I can trust him and follow him.' As John says in v11, 'this, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.' Let us do likewise.