

Simon was a farmer just outside the tiny village of Cana. Cana was so small that many people didn't even know it was there.

Even though it was said that this was a land flowing with milk and honey, in reality it was hilly, stony and arid. His family grew barley, olive and grapes and ran a few goats. Eking out a living there was hard work. Life had its rhythm – ploughing, sowing and reaping the barley. Then winnowing – that was hard work. Grinding flour and baking bread. Harvesting the olives. Pickling some, pressing most of them for cooking and lighting. Pruning the grape vines with chapped hands, picking the plump fruit in the summer, drying some and treading the wine. Shearing the goats, spinning wool and making clothes. They grew vegetables and herbs. Simon and his family worked from the moment that the sun peeped over the horizon until bedtime.

That was six days a week, but on the Sabbath they rested in accordance with the Law. And they made regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem, especially for the six day long feast of Tabernacles. It was a fabulous time. They reaffirmed their commitment to the God of their ancestors, they thanked God for the gift of water and at night they danced in the courtyard of the temple which was flood lit with the candles of four great menorahs.

Life had its rhythm. But one day Simon was offered a bit of relief from everyday life. His friend Peter asked him to be the friend of the bridegroom. So Peter was wanting to get married. Simon was excited. To be the friend of the bridegroom was a great honour and came with much responsibility

Peter had his eye on Maria, Isaac's daughter. She was, according to Peter, gorgeous looking, hardworking and she came from a good family. What more could a man want? Simon took his role seriously. He approached Isaac and raised the subject. They met a few times. Simon worked hard to get a good dowry. Isaac was wily. He was not a poor man, but he had four daughters. He could not afford too large a dowry.

At no time throughout these negotiations was Maria consulted. Nor her mother. During these diplomacies, Simon reported back to Peter. If it all went pear-shaped, then Peter had plausible deniability. In that case, it was forbidden for Simon to marry Maria. This was to prevent a friend of the bridegroom from ever sabotaging the process for his own benefit.

Fortunately, in this case everything went smoothly and the date for the nuptials was set. All the village was invited. This was a time to show off, a time for the grand gesture. Even visitors travelling through the town were invited. And that is how Jesus, his mother and a small number of his cronies happened to be there.

Maria along with her Mum, her sisters and her aunts and the servants had cooked for a week. On the big day, they did themselves proud. Flatbread, dips, olives and vegetables graced every table. The servants looked at each other with disgust as they saw people stuffing themselves greedily. One would think that they hadn't had a feed in a week!

Peter had supplied the wine. It was good wine, the best he could afford and it should have been enough.

The chief steward sidled up to Simon and reported that the vats of wine were running low. In fact, they were nearly empty. Simon was ashen. He baled up Peter and reported the catastrophe to him. Peter's face drained of colour. This was a calamity of epic proportions. People would remember and snigger for the rest of his life. He would be an object of scorn and ridicule. He would never live it down.

Simon had thought he was being discreet in approaching Peter, but a woman overheard their conversation. He watched as she walked off purposefully. He thought she was a distant cousin of someone in the village, but he had no real idea who she was or what her name was.

Peter and Simon sat on a bench to talk things over. In the city, one could go to a wine dealer and buy more, but not here in Cana. Peter, who'd been dancing and full of joy just a few minutes ago, was now in despair. He needed a drink, but the one thing he needed he couldn't have.

Next thing, the chief steward approached them, bringing them each a glass of wine and beaming from ear to ear. You're a strange man, Peter. Where did you get this wine from? And why are you serving the good wine now? You can see that most people are a little worse for wear. Peter and Simon sipped the wine without a lot of confidence. They looked at each other with amazement. It was not just good, it was excellent. It was better than the wine that Peter had laid in for the occasion. Where had it come from?

The only ones who knew were the servants. Oh, and us, because we listened to the gospel reading today.

That is how weddings were arranged in Jesus' time. This is a wonderful story with layers and layers and layers of meaning. At the heart of John's gospel is the question – who is this Jesus? The gospel begins with creation and the words “in the beginning,” the same words that begin the first creation story in Genesis. This places the story of Jesus in a cosmic context. The original end of the gospel is in a garden where Mary Magdalene sees her risen Lord – an allusion to the garden of Eden in the second creation story.

This story of the wedding at Cana is often seen as an affirmation of marriage, which it is. It suggests that Jesus liked a good party, and I'm sure that he did. It is used as a warrant for the drinking of alcohol, which is a pretty poor use of the text in my humble opinion. The story goes way beyond any of these explanations.

This story is one of the seven signs in John's gospel. But there is no royal official desperate enough to approach an itinerant preacher because his son is near death. There is no paralytic who continued to hope for a cure after 38 years by the healing pool. There is no crowd, hungry for the words that Jesus spoke but also hungry for food after listening to him for a long time. There are no close friends whose beloved brother has died.

So in what way is the turning of water into wine a sign? A sign points beyond itself to a greater reality. If you see a sign by the side of the road with a picture of a wombat, you know to take care because one of these gorgeous creatures might be ambling across the road.

The story looks back to the history and tradition of the Jewish people. It begins “On the third day.” The number three was one that rang bells for Jewish people. So when the writer talks about the third day, hearers would remember the history of the Hebrew people in the wilderness after their liberation from slavery in Egypt, their foundational story. Exodus 19 speaks of their arrival at Mt Sinai where the law was given. “On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai.”

Three days also looks forward to the three days that Jesus’ body was lying in the tomb before his resurrection. This is our foundational story. This story is a bridge between the past and the future. John’s gospel is full of allusions like this, as we’ll see, and that is part of what makes it so exciting. This story is full of pointers back to the salvation history of the past and forward to the cross. Jesus is shown as doing much more than just saving people from embarrassment. This story is a sign to a greater reality.

The wine here is a powerful image of God’s generosity. The writer of John’s gospel tells us that there were six massive water jars in the house. Each one held 20 to 30 gallons. If we split the difference and multiply 25 by 6 we end up with 150 gallons or more than 681 litres. That is crazy generosity. It is foolish extravagance.

Psalms 104 tells us that God gives wine to gladden the human heart. Proverbs 3 tells us that if we honour God, our barns will be filled with plenty and our vats bursting with wine.

The prophet Isaiah's vision for the future is that the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines. The prophet Amos promises a time when the people shall plant vineyards and drink their wine. On the cross, Jesus drank wine. He said "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." The image of wine is steeped in the tradition of God's people and it indicates the cross.

Mary asks Jesus for help, but his answer is brusque. John's gospel never names Mary, but always calls her "the mother of Jesus." But Jesus calls her "woman." Quite a put down, one might think. This is startling and disrespectful. If any of my children addressed me as Woman, I would be concerned. What did I do to upset them to that degree? But no, Woman was a respectful title in Jesus' day. And it foreshadows the cross where Jesus again addresses her as "Woman."

Jesus tells his mother that his hour has not come. His hour is his crucifixion. We read in John 7 that the temple authorities tried to arrest Jesus, but they couldn't because his hour had not come. John 17 is known as Jesus' high priestly prayer after the Last Supper. It begins with Jesus praying, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you."

The glory of God is one of the major themes of Exodus. God's glory will be revealed in the liberation of the Hebrew people, God's glory was in the cloud that led them by day and the glory of God settled on Mt Sinai. The prologue to John's gospel tells us that in the Word of God which became flesh and lived among us, we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth. The writer of John's gospel tells us that the sign at Cana revealed Jesus' glory.

When we look at Jesus, we know what God is like. When we hear this story, we know that God is about abundance. So often we worry about not having enough – not enough people, not enough time, not enough money. Jesus says, you have everything you need. When we are baptised, we enter God's family. We enter into a feast flowing with wine. The glory of God is found in dancing and singing. It is found in life in all its fullness.

The phrase, the glory of the cross trips easily from our lips. I find it hard to imagine anything less glorious. Three men, brutalised and tortured, executed in a method that was designed to humiliate. Soldiers hardened to the extent that they could do this to other human beings without flinching. Family and friends of the three men gathered in grief and despair. Dust and flies.

But the glory is there. Jesus says to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple standing with her, the one whom he loved, probably John, "Here is your mother." The familial relationship is redefined. If the disciple is now the son of Jesus' mother, then the disciple is the brother of Jesus. And every disciple – you and me included – is a sister or brother of Jesus. And we are sisters and brothers of each other.

This brings us back to the question: "Who is this Jesus and does the story of the wedding at Cana shed any light on our quest?" The gospel writer tells us that this event is a sign. It points beyond itself to a greater reality.

It was the task of the bridegroom to provide wine for the wedding feast.

And the one who provided the wine at that wedding in the tiny village of Cana on that fateful day was none other than Jesus, the bridegroom promised by the prophets. We heard about this in our first reading. “For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”

In the next chapter of the gospel, Jesus is affirmed as the bridegroom. John the Baptist reveals himself to be the friend of the bridegroom. His joy is fulfilled because he has completed his role as the friend of the bridegroom.

The image of the bridegroom tells us of God’s love. God’s love is passionate, attentive, tender and ardent. Jesus the bridegroom came all those years ago, but the bridegroom comes and woos God’s people in every generation.

The Word is again made flesh in this family; it continues to show the glory of God in all its abundance of grace and truth. We are part of Jesus’ cosmic story.