

Sermon for Epiphany 3. 14th January 2021 written by Prebendary Kay Garlick

John 2 v1-11

We often talk about being in a “covenant relationship” with God. A covenant is not the same thing as a promise – I could promise to give you the last chocolate in the box, and all you have to do is wait until the box is nearly empty and hope I remember my promise when the time comes! You have no responsibility to make it happen. But for there to be a covenant made, both parties have to take responsibility – both make a promise to the other.

God made a Covenant with the people of Israel: “You shall be my people and I will be your God” and the people agreed to their side of that bargain – “we will be your people”. But unfortunately the people found it really difficult to keep their side of the agreement, and so the Old Covenant had to be renewed, re-made, many times. And we read those stories in the books of the Old Testament. Indeed the Old Testament is sometimes called the Old Covenant.

And then Jesus came to institute a new covenant relationship between God and his people, one based on love – with our part of the bargain being that we love each other as Christ has loved us. And that’s the story we read in the New Testament, and that’s the covenant we enter into through our Baptism.

One of the best examples of Covenant is found in the marriage service, where the couple make promises to each other, and both take responsibility for their future relationship. And if you watched a wedding service with the sound switched off, you would still know exactly what was going on by the choreography and symbolic actions you see.

The couple arrive separately at the altar, and stand side by side, facing the front, with their family and friends behind and beside them. But when they come to make their vows, they turn to face one another - their focus changes from the family that brought them up, to each other and the life they will share together. I think it is often that moment that parents find most hard – however happy they are about this new relationship, it is that “turning away” that seems to mark a parting – a new focus – a new direction.

After the vows and the exchanging of rings, when the couple leave the church, they walk ahead together, and the family and friends follow on rejoicing, but acknowledging that this is a new covenant relationship that has been made, and although it will be based on all that the couple have learned from them in the past, and although they can continue to support and help and encourage, they must let the couple go, into a new life together.

Small wonder then that a wedding celebration should be the setting for the first of Jesus' signs of the new covenant between God and his people. We don't know who the bride and groom actually were at the wedding in Cana, but we do know that Mary, Jesus' mother, was already there and clearly had some role in organizing the party, so it may well have been a member of her family being married that day. Jesus had spent the last few days gathering his disciples to him. Two of them were sent to him by John the Baptist, then those two brought others, then there was Philip who brought Nathaniel, and then "on the third day" they all went together to the wedding at Cana in Galilee.

Of course, John's use of the phrase "on the third day" makes us think ahead to that other "third day" when God will demonstrate his covenant love for us through the miracle of Resurrection. But today is just the beginning of that new relationship between God and his people.

The wedding feast is steeped in tradition – Mary herself represents the culture and religion into which Jesus was born, and in which he was nurtured, as do the six water jars standing there which were used for the Jewish purification rites. The wine runs out, and Mary realizes that something new is needed and that Jesus is the person who will provide a new way ahead. So she tells him "they have no wine", and Jesus says to her "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."

That use of the word "Woman" grates with us, but it is actually a term of respect, and it is also an acknowledgement of making some distance between his mother and himself. We note he will use that term again later, speaking from the cross, when he will indicate that she belongs now with his beloved disciple. "Woman behold your son" and to the disciple "here is your mother".

But for now, here at the wedding feast, Mary knows and accepts that something new is happening – that her son is turning towards a new Way, and that she must let him go. She tells the servants to do whatever he tells them to do, and so the miracle happens – the water that is now drawn out from those old water jars is transformed into wine – and not just any wine but the best wine.

The old order is passed, but not forgotten or rejected – after all the stone water jars are not smashed to pieces – but the water drawn out from them is now transformed. From now on, Jesus will leave his home and his mother and travel with his disciples to show people the new Way – a way of loving and caring and forgiving which mirrors the love that God offers his people, as this new covenant is lived out. And there will be suffering and pain and sorrow on the Way, but there will be hope and joy and Resurrection too.

As Christians, we see ourselves as the people of the Way – at our Baptism we entered into the new covenant relationship with God of which the miracle of water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana was the first sign. But what does it mean for us? What is the responsibility we have promised to show? It is to love one another as Christ has loved us – with that selfless, sacrificial,

forgiving love that he showed in his life and death. And we are used to being active in his service – judging our own faithfulness by what we do and say. And we do see that kind of selfless love in action at the moment as we see health workers and carers and other key workers risking their own safety and physical and mental wellbeing to support those who are suffering through this pandemic.

But most of us are having to learn a new way of loving others by keeping away from them – showing that love not by our actions but by our staying at home. Our self-sacrifice is shown in our inactivity. And it is really hard. We wonder: are we still serving God? Are we keeping our side of the bargain? If we read the words of the renewal of covenant below, we can rest assured that even in times like these, perhaps especially in times like these, we are God's people and he is our God.

We are no longer our own but yours.

Put us to what you will,

rank us with whom you will;

put us to doing,

put us to suffering;

let us be employed for you,

or laid aside for you,

exalted for you,

or brought low for you;

let us be full,

let us be empty,

let us have all things,

let us have nothing:

We freely and wholeheartedly yield all things

to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, glorious and blessed God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

you are ours and we are yours. So be it.

And the covenant which we have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.'