

## Searching for Cana

Isaiah 62:1-5

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

John 2:1-11

The chief of a tribe of a certain people invited all the men to a celebration and as part of the preparations, he asked each man to bring a flagon of their best wine to share with the others. One of the men, who was inclined to be stingy and rather mean with his possessions thinks about the whole process. He knows that everyone is invited to bring their very best wine. He also knows that it will all be poured into a large container, blending the flavours, and so he decides that he needn't waste any of his very good wine. Instead, he decides that he will bring a flagon of water. After all, no one will notice one flagon of water when it is added to all that wine, and he will be able to keep his good wine for himself.

On the day of the celebration arrives and all of the men gather with the chief.. The wine is all poured together into the large container and then each is given some wine to drink. As they raise their mugs they sip, and then look in shock at one another — for each one has done the same thing, and all there is in the large container is water.

The story of Cana stands in stark contrast to the story of those who gathered for the great celebration — for here, the wine is of the best quality and nothing is held back. It's a story full of meaning for us, a story which reminds us that God holds nothing back from us, and a story which asks us how much we hold back from God.

Since my trip to Israel every time I hear any reference made to Cana, and to the wonder of water being turned into wine, I am transported back. Cana is very high on the list of places to see when one visits Israel, particularly when one visits Israel with a church group. But, and those of you who have visited Israel will know, when they take visitors to Cana, they aren't really taking you to the \*real\* Cana, they are taking you to a pseudo

Cana. The \*real\* Cana, they believe, is located at a site which is not yet excavated. They point off into the distance and say something along the lines of: “Archaeologists believe that the original Cana is in the middle of that area, but we haven’t been able to excavate it yet. But because Cana has such religious significance for Christians, a new community was built, and named Cana, and that’s where we’re going.” There’s a church there which commemorates the first sign found in the Gospel According to John’s book of signs. And there are wine shops. There are numerous wine shops. We were taken directly from the church — where a rude monk was anxious to close — to a shop which specialised in wine, for a sample.

Ever since then, the story of Cana has a new significance for me. This story serves as a reminder of how readily and how easily we settle for something less than the life to which we are called, and the people we are meant to be. It doesn’t really matter whether we can actually walk in the same town of Cana as Jesus visited for the wedding. But somehow we think that it does. We want something that we can touch or taste or feel, and so, very obligingly, there is a town that provides us with those things.

At the wedding feast in Cana, Jesus performs a miracle, though John’s gospel doesn’t call them miracles, but rather “signs” — indications that in Jesus the Word of God has been made flesh. But very few people observed the miracle. Mary knew, Jesus’ followers knew, the wine stewards knew, but most of the people were oblivious. All they knew was that the wine did not run out. We, the insiders, know why it is that the wine does not run out. And what do we do with that knowledge?

We’ve been given an example. Jesus turns the water into wine, and fine wine at that. There is no stinting, no holding back, no cutting corners - no flagon of water substituted to diminish the gift. God gives to us, graciously, generously, extravagantly. How do we give back?

Ralph Milton, one of the United Church's gifted story teller comments that Jesus turned water into wine, and the church has been trying to change it back ever since. Too often it feels as though that's true.

According to John's Gospel, and John's Gospel is not a narrative like the other three but a theological account, the very first act that Jesus does after calling his disciples, is to go to a wedding feast. He goes to a party. And he ensures that the wine does not run out, that the party does not end. He doesn't censure the drinkers. He doesn't complain about whether the celebrants are serious enough, sober enough (in any sense of the word) or pious enough. He does protest when his mother asks him to help — but that is because he is at the very start of his ministry and he knows what his first act heralds. It isn't a protest about being asked to help — it's a protest that allows him to express the fear that must mingle with the excitement and the joy. John's Jesus has no illusions about what lies ahead. And the wedding feast thrusts Jesus onto the stage — whether he's ready or not.

But there is an abundance about his graciousness that challenges us. The wine flows at the party and the celebration continues. Where is our abundance? Where is our generosity of spirit? Where is our joy?

When we're asked to bring a bottle of our best wine, do we substitute water? Do we give extravagantly, or are we miserly with our gifts? Do we reach out to others freely, openly, lovingly? Or do we stand back and eye them suspiciously, demanding that they love what we love, and how we love, that they live their lives according to our dictates? Are we suspicious of joy? Of laughter? Do we live lives that reflect an understanding of our God who gives extravagantly, or do we convince people that our God is as miserly as we are?

The story of the wedding feast at Cana is a story full of meaning and invitation for us. Here we find an overwhelming illustration of how God's love and grace flow to us. Without reservation, without qualification,

without restriction. That's the most wonderful news for each and every one of us. It's also a challenge for us. For in that generosity and grace there is an invitation to give that freely and abundantly to others. To stop trying to change the wine back into water, or to find the "real" Cana, and instead to embrace the fulness of God's love, and to do everything that we can to make sure that everyone knows about the party, and knows as well that they are included in the invitation.

In our personal lives, in our church life, in our conversations as a congregation involved in discussions about our future, we are invited to live our faith in ways that express our belief in the grace and generosity of our God who ensures that the wine does not run out, and that party continues. It's the most wonderful invitation, and the most glorious illustration of our God. May we live lives that give witness to this generosity and grace. Amen.