

When I worked in Paris for a year, it will not surprise you to hear that I had many visitors. A favourite destination for them was the Louvre, and the Mona Lisa, despite my warnings that they might find it a disappointment and they would certainly find it small.

While my guests were fighting their way through the crowds to squint at the Mona Lisa, I would take myself to the other side of the room to lose myself in one of my favourite paintings. It is the largest painting in the Louvre collection, measuring some 7 metres in height and 10 metres in width. This is the ‘Wedding Feast at Cana’ by Paolo Veronese; his depiction of the story we have just heard from John’s Gospel.

The painting was commissioned in 1562 by the Benedictine monks of San Georgio monastery in Venice, to decorate the wall of the new dining hall recently designed for them by the architect Andrea Palladio. The contract stipulated that the painting represent the history of the banquet of Christ’s miracle at Cana in Galilee and include as many people as possible. In a nice touch of humour, the contract included as part of the payment, a barrel of wine for Veronese.

What Veronese delivered for the monks is a painting of great exuberance and colour. There are dogs and cats and even a parrot. There are Greco-Roman pillars and, in a nod to the dining hall’s architect, a Palladian arcaded tower. There are around 130 different people depicted, most dressed in the most stylish of sixteenth century Venetian clothing. Some people think they have spotted among the wedding guests, Queen Mary I of England, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and Suleiman the Magnificent, the 10th sultan of the Ottoman Empire: - and a woman cleaning her teeth with a toothpick – as a woman of a certain age I can identify with her! It is such a beautiful painting that when Napoleon, always one with an eye to the main chance, invaded Italy in 1797, he stole it, which is why it is now in the Louvre.

Why did the monks choose this first of the miraculous signs in John’s Gospel, signs of who Jesus is and how we should respond to him, as the subject for this enormous painting, which the monks would look at during their silent meals every day of their lives? Can Veronese’s visual interpretation painted in the turbulent 1560s aid our understanding in turbulent times today of why this miracle matters?

One reason is that, throughout the Old Testament, weddings and marriage were used as a symbol of the relationship between God and mankind and of the covenant relationship, the sacred promises between God and the people of Israel. For Jesus to perform this first of his miraculous signs at a wedding is a sign that God will use him to take that relationship with mankind to a new level.

Weddings in Jesus' day, as now, were also a byword for celebration, dancing and possibly even a little drinking. I went to a lovely wedding in Ireland over New Year, and was amused to see that I could if I wished continue drinking till 4am in the morning in the Dungeon bar. Being a bit of a lightweight, I didn't make it past midnight. But the wedding was the most enormous fun at a dark and damp time of year.

In first century Galilee, in a place where there was much poverty and constant hard work, weddings were certainly one of the supreme occasions in life. Wine itself was seen as a symbol of God's blessing. And when the prophet Joel looked ahead to the coming of God's Messiah, he said 'in that day the mountains will drip with new wine'. For Jesus, the embodiment of God's blessing on us, to reveal himself for the first time at a wedding, is to say something very powerful about the exuberance of the love of God.

I think this miracle also points ahead to the Last Supper, when Jesus would make the link between wine, and his own shedding of his blood for the salvation of mankind. Just as everyone at the banquet would be able to drink their fill of the miraculous wine and there would still be plenty over, just as those fed on the five barley loaves would be able to eat their fill and still have baskets of pieces of bread left over, so Jesus' death is more than enough for our redemption. Veronese certainly made that link between this miracle and Jesus' death in his painting. He rather unsubtly paints lamb being carved above the head of Jesus to make the link with the sacrifice of the Lamb of God.

So this miracle has a lot to say about the big picture narrative of salvation. But it also says something about Jesus' presence in the every day. The six stone water jars for washing were part of everyday Jewish life. Water and washing are a part of everyday life. Jesus takes these ordinary pots and this ordinary water and transforms it through his words. Just as John has told us in the Prologue to the Gospel which we heard at Christmas that 'all things came into being through the Word' so this wine comes into being through the Word.

David Ford in his wonderful commentary on John says ‘ It is as if our visual concept of the ordinary simply needs to be enlarged to take account of the reality of God, and God’s creativity, freedom and generosity.’ Wherever Jesus went, wherever Jesus goes, it is like water turning into wine.

As in much Renaissance religious painting, by painting Biblical stories in the culture of the time, Veronese shows that the message of scripture is timeless and speaks to all ages. God’s grace is not restricted by human time and space. But because religious artists were almost always painting for the wealthy – whether families or monasteries – their contexts, like Veronese’s tend to be grand – lofty architecture, fine clothes, exotic foods. I think Veronese is aware that this risks obscuring the fact that the original miracle took place in a very humble setting, an ordinary village wedding. So Jesus is painted wearing the Galilean dress of his day. It does slightly give the impression Jesus hadn’t read the dress code on the invitation! But by painting Jesus in this way, Veronese illustrates that whether we are in first century Galilee, 16th century Venice, or 21st century Cambridge, whether we are a poor peasant, a monk, an ordinary member of the congregation in Newnham or Grantchester– whoever

we are and wherever we live, Jesus comes into the everyday with his generous love, if we only have eyes to see it.

And Jesus does not choose to act alone. His mother Mary brings the problem to him. The servants follow his instructions. They are taking a huge risk in taking this liquid to the head waiter. We are told that the disciples put their faith in Jesus because of this miracle, but in fact it was the servants who believed and obeyed first. The servants are both the vehicles and the recipients of Jesus’ miracle as he commands them to fill the water pots and draw the wine out of them. They are the first to know what is going on. In Veronese’s painting, the servants are hidden away in the bottom right hand corner, amongst the colour and pageantry of the wedding, humbly going about their task. You have to look quite hard to find them.

So I think Veronese’s painting helps us understand the miracle of Jesus in three ways.

He helps us see how this miracle fits into the story of Jesus as the Saviour of the World.

He encourages us to look for the transforming miracles of Jesus in our everyday lives – things that only we might see. Through the resurrection and the giving of the Holy Spirit, the power that was at work in the wedding at Cana is available to us today. Let's ask God to help us see where his generous love is at work in our lives, transforming our water into wine.

Now as then, God is looking for our obedience, for our hands to work as vehicles for others to experience the generosity of God – even if those others don't recognise its source. Let's be like Mary, and bring others' problems to the Lord, and be like the servants and be prepared to play our humble and hidden role in bringing God's transformational love into every situation we meet.

In all these ways, God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. Glory be to Him.