

Let's pray. Father God, as we come this morning to look at your word to us in more detail, help us to be open to you so that we may learn more of the Lord Jesus and resolve to follow him with all our heart, mind, strength and will. Amen.

Today is the first of several weeks looking at the Gospel of John, a most remarkable and distinctive document.

The first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, are very similar to each other. They are largely narratives that follow roughly the same order and include many of the same stories. This is why they are called the "synoptic gospels", "synoptic" here meaning "a common perspective".¹

John's Gospel is quite different. It was written later, probably when the apostle John was an old man. By then problems in the church seem to have included false teachers, some who didn't believe that Jesus was divine, others who denied his humanity.

So, John starts off "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1) and in verse 14 of chapter 1 "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. ..." The concept of the "Word" had meaning for both a Greco-Roman and a Jewish audience.²

"In the beginning" echoes the creation story in Genesis – seven days. To the Jews, seven is a very significant number. Seven is the number that represents completeness and wholeness. And Jesus, the eternal Word of God, through whom all things were made, has come to renew creation.

John writes in a different style from the synoptic gospels, he uses a lot of symbolism. He covers many different events in Jesus' life, but both John and the other gospels cover Jesus' final week – his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, his trial, death and resurrection.

So, John's account of the life of Jesus Christ is different from, but complementary with, the other Gospel writers.

John organises his writing around themes. One significant, distinctive theme is Jesus' seven "I am" statements. Another is John's record of the "signs". So, the title of our series for the next few weeks is "Seven Signs in John's Gospel".

But, what are these "signs"? Why are they there?



Let's start by thinking more generally. What is a sign? What does it do?

¹ John: The Gospel of the Eternal Son Who Reveals the Father, The Maverick Gospel by Mark L. Strauss – Sept 23, 2017, <https://bibleproject.com/articles/john-gospel-eternal-son-reveals-father>

² As above.

Well, signs are important. They give us direction. They warn us of danger. They show us how we can live well together. They all make us aware of something that we might not otherwise have known. We see them everywhere. Most of them we take notice of, but some we don't. Perhaps we ignore graffiti ones.

So, what are the “signs” and why are they in John’s account of Jesus Christ? What do they point us to? How do we need to respond to them? Let’s look at the last two verses in John’s Gospel.

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.
(John 20:30-31)

And in chapter 2 verse 11

¹¹ What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

So, the “signs” in John’s gospel are what the other gospel writers call “miracles”. But, why the different term? What is its significance? How will it make a difference in my life?

Let’s explore the first of these signs in John’s Gospel together this morning. At the beginning of chapter 2 we read

² On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus’ mother was there, ² and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.

Jesus was known for going to parties, in fact it often got him into trouble. He was often accused of eating with “tax collectors and sinners”. No trace of “unsavoury characters” here though, but Jesus loved a party. He loved being with people. He enjoyed their company.

But then, catastrophe! The wine ran out! What shame that would bring on the hosts! They would be the talk of the district for years to come.

³ When the wine was gone, Jesus’ mother said to him, ‘They have no more wine.’

Jesus’ mother was there and she alerted Jesus to the problem. A typical mother response, but Jesus’ reply is a little confronting, at least to our 21st century Western ears. Also, somewhat confusing.

⁴ ‘Woman, why do you involve me?’ Jesus replied. ‘My hour has not yet come.’

The footnote in the NIV version helps us here. “The Greek for *Woman* does not denote any disrespect”, whereas to us, it sounds almost insulting.

That solved part of the problem, but why did he say “My hour has not yet come”?

Jesus’ “hour” and his “glory” are recurring themes in John’s Gospel. By his “hour”, he is referring to the hour of his death, his death by crucifixion³. But why would he be thinking about this at a wedding celebration? And why bring it up now? Was it because that would be the ultimate “sign” that all other signs would lead to, the culmination of his glory being revealed? That was why he had come, to bear the sins of the world.

³ John 12:23-33

Or, perhaps he was thinking ahead to the great wedding banquet where he will be revealed in all his glory, the Messiah's banquet predicted by the prophet Isaiah⁴. But it was only through his death that he would open the door to this great banquet, the celebration of all celebrations, that will last through all eternity. In fact, he is the door through which we can enter the banquet.⁵

But, "his hour has not yet come". There were many things for him to do first. So, Jesus pulled his mind back from the future to the present.

We found Jesus' response to Mary somewhat confusing. Now Mary's response is surprising.

⁵ His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.'

Why would the servants listen to her? Did she have some sort of official role? Or was she just well-known and respected? Cana was near Nazareth where she and her family lived. Anyway, the servants listened to her and did what she said.

But, more surprises!

⁶ Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from eighty to a hundred and twenty litres.

(Illustration of what 100 litres looks like.) It was just as well the celebrations lasted 7 days or more.⁶

And perhaps there is also some symbolism here behind Jesus' unfolding actions. These water jars usually held the water for ceremonial washing. Water was used in ancient Israelite rituals for purification. But now, the blood of Jesus, [God's] Son, purifies us from all sin.⁷ And, in Holy Communion, wine is the symbol for the blood of Jesus.

Continuing with the story in John chapter 2:

⁷ Jesus said to the servants, 'Fill the jars with water'; so they filled them to the brim.

They filled them with water. But why? Here's the real surprise. The shocking truth comes out.

⁸ Then he told them, 'Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.'

Take the water to the master of the banquet! They did what Jesus asked, but it was risky.

They did so, ⁹ and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realise where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew.

At what stage did the water become wine? Before the servants scooped out a cup of the liquid? As they carried it to the master of the banquet? Or, as they gave it to him? We will never know. But often with miracles, when we are in a predicament that only God can get us out of, he leaves the rescue until the last minute. Why? Perhaps so we learn to really trust him? So that God gets the glory, not us? Or ...?

Let me digress a little to illustrate this with an almost current day story of a miracle.

⁴ Isaiah 25:6-8

⁵ John 10:7-9 RSV

⁶ <https://bible-history.com/biblestudy/marriage>

⁷ 1 John 1:7

Many years ago, we ran what we called “The Christian Youth Workshop”. A dozen or so teenagers came to our home each Saturday afternoon. They restored an old car, did some electronic projects and cooked dinner. After dinner we sat around sharing life and faith.

One evening, Arthur was sitting on the arm of a chair and couldn’t disguise the pain that shot through his back. The young people couldn’t help but see this. They said that we had been telling them about Jesus in the Bible who healed people. So, they laid him out on the floor and gathered around to pray for him. Outwardly nothing changed, but inwardly Arthur was aware of peace and confidence that he had been healed.

Monday was his first day of prac teaching. Rising that morning, the pain remained, but the peace did too. So, we decided to go forward in faith. As he drove over the bridge the pain was still there, perhaps easing a little, so he just kept praising God. As he walked across the car park at Clarence High School, the pain continued to ease. By the time he got to the staff room it had gone completely and he worked the full day with no problems. God had rescued him in the nick of time, we were all very thankful, and we had all been strengthened in our faith. Now he only gets back pain if he has done something silly or if he is out of relationship with someone.

So, Arthur’s story illustrates the principle that when we are in a predicament that only God can get us out of, he often leaves the rescue until the last minute. Why? Perhaps so we learn to really trust him.

Now, back to the story in John’s Gospel, chapter 2.

Then [the master of the banquet] called the bridegroom aside ¹⁰ and said, ‘Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.’

So, the water had become wine, but not just any wine. It was the best wine. Wine that stood out to the “master of the banquet”, someone who would have known his wines, the best wine that he had ever tasted.

Why?

¹¹ What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

This was a sign to reveal Jesus’ glory. To give a clue as to who he really is. But what does the word “glory” actually mean? Honour? Goodness and love shining from him? His status as the Messiah, the eternal Son of God? Maybe the Transfiguration might help us. This is one of those incidents that John doesn’t record, but the other gospel writers do.

²⁹ As [Jesus] was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. ³⁰ Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus. ³¹ They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem. (Luke 9:29-31)

Here Jesus’ glory is shown as a very bright light shining from him, as Moses and Elijah, those great Old Testament leaders, speak with him about his coming death. This brings to mind, in the Old Testament, how Moses’ face shone so brightly after he had met with God on Mount

Sinai and been given the ten commandments, that he had to cover his face so people would not be overwhelmed.⁸

But also, “light” is another one of those recurring themes in John’s Gospel. One of Jesus’ seven “I am” statements is “I am the light of the world”.⁹

When we think of “glory”, we think of light, majesty, power, authority, status, recognition ... We saw this at the transfiguration, but also at the transfiguration “they spoke of his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem.”

Somehow, his glory is also tied up with his death!

But again, back to our story in John chapter 2 verse 11.

<p>¹¹ What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.</p>
--

The Jews would have acknowledged God as the creator of the earth, the plants, including grape vines, and the rain and sunshine. All these things needed to be just right to grow the perfect grapes. Then they must be picked, trodden to release the juice which was put into new animal skins, sealed up and left for many months, or perhaps years, to mature. Then, if you were lucky, you would have a good wine.

But this was the best wine, and Jesus did it in an instant. Who was this man? Was he sent from God? Or was he God? How could this be? What did it mean? What does it mean “his disciples believed in him”? Why was it only his disciples who believed in him? Why not everyone who was there?

At the time, it was only those close to Jesus, his disciples, who knew what had happened. Also, there were the servants. These were lowly people who had no riches and no standing in society, but were part of that first glimpse of who Jesus is, that sign of his divine glory shown by his power over nature.

It also gives a foretaste of Jesus’ upside-down kingdom in which the last shall be first, and the first last.

But now, we know what happened too. Will we “believe in him”? What does that mean?

In John’s Gospel, “believing is both a one-time act of trusting surrender, and ongoing trust and deeper surrender”.¹⁰

So, “believing in Jesus” is not just a one-off commitment, although it starts that way. It involves a life-time of following Jesus, of a deepening relationship, of obedience even if everything seems hopeless, of trusting him to guide us and at times rescue us. It is not a life of guaranteed happiness, but a life-time of adventure, sometimes with suffering, sometimes doubts, following wherever he leads us by his word and his Holy Spirit.

And, “believing in him” and “his glory” seem to go together, and somehow, they are both tied up with Jesus’ death. How does this work?

⁸ Exodus 34:29-35

⁹ John 8:12

¹⁰ *John, Responding to the Incomparable Story of Jesus* by Scot McKnight, p8.

In John chapter 12, Jesus says that it is in his crucifixion that his glory is most powerfully revealed.¹¹ But how can his glory, his divine character, be shown most through a degrading and demeaning death? Crucifixion – a death that involved shame, humiliation, darkness ... The place where he laid aside his glory in self-sacrifice, the place where he gave his life as a ransom for many.¹² Perhaps it is because overwhelming love and care for the lost, downtrodden and broken-hearted are essential qualities of the divine character.

Through his death on the cross, Jesus, the eternal Son of God, the Lord of Glory¹³, made it possible for us to be set free. Jesus, the one who had never sinned, took all our sin on himself and paid the price to redeem us. This is why he came.

Is this God's upside-down kingdom again?

So, this morning, as we remember the sign of Jesus turning water into the most delicious wine, a sign that points us to Jesus' divine nature, it was at a particular wedding banquet at a particular point in history.

But that wedding banquet also points us to the eternal wedding banquet that is to come, the banquet where Jesus' glory will be fully revealed. In this wedding banquet, he is the bridegroom.

Jesus, the bridegroom, has laid down his life for his beloved bride, the church. By his death on the cross, he took on himself the punishment for everything that we have ever done wrong¹⁴, so that we can be forgiven and made clean, to have peace and healing. We can have a new start. Just as symbolically a bride wears a white dress, we can be "washed in Jesus' blood"¹⁵ to be made pure and spotless for the heavenly bridegroom.

He loves us and wants us to love him too. We just have to say yes to him, or in the language of a wedding, "I do."

Jesus is the bridegroom and he is utterly faithful. He will never leave or forsake us. "I do" is just the beginning, this is forever.

We are all invited to Jesus' heavenly banquet, to be part of "the bride of Christ". Will you come? Let's all be there. And bring our friends too. It's going to be a great party!

Let's pray.

Father, thank you for Jesus coming to earth to share our humanity, thank you that this first sign in John's Gospel points us to his divine nature. Help us to believe in him, to love him, to follow him all our days, and draw our life and strength from him. And we'll be there for the party. In his name we pray. Amen.

Picture of Signs: <https://freedomvtest.org/know-shapes-colors-traffic-signs/>

Some other references that might be helpful for further reading:

Introduction to John in the YouVersion Bible app.

<https://bibleproject.com/articles/what-are-the-gospels/>

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%201&version=NCB> (footnotes)

<https://www.gccc.net/john/is-john-re-creating-the-creation-story-in-jesus/>

<https://billygraham.org/devotion/cleansed-by-the-blood/>

¹¹ John 12:23-33

¹² Mark 10:45

¹³ 1 Corinthians 2:8

¹⁴ Isaiah 53:5

¹⁵ Rev 1:5b NKJV