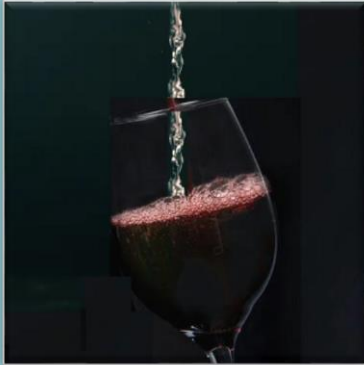


Water into wine?



“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.”

John 2:11

Responding to a sceptic

Do I have to believe that Jesus really turned water into wine? This was a question asked by one of the ladies participating in our monthly church lunch, an honest concern that certainly deserves an answer. When we talk with others about our faith, it’s helpful if we can respond to their questions. How would you have responded?

The passage in John’s gospel chapter 2 is particularly well-known. It is read at Christian weddings to show that Jesus affirmed the institution of marriage. There was no doubt in the questioner’s mind that Jesus was a real person who lived in first century Palestine. Neither had she a problem believing that Jesus was a good man who helped many people and taught many true and helpful things. But she expressed some scepticism about miracles and raised concern that to be considered a genuine Christian she was *required* to accept that they really happened. Do I *have to believe* such things? That was her question.

Of course, a proper answer is way beyond the scope of a short weekly posting. It would take at least a book to do justice to her concern. So, this week’s contribution is merely an outline to establish the contours of a response. Although brief, it was

nevertheless, offered with respect. Here’s how I responded.

The question divides into two parts. The first is that if Jesus was who he claimed to be, then could he have changed water into wine? This, I believe, is simple to answer. If he really was divine – God incarnate then yes, he could. It is entirely reasonable that the creator of the world, responsible for bringing creation into being, could do things beyond the limitations of ordinary human beings.

But the second part of the question is less straightforward. Did this person known as Jesus actually do such a thing? Is that what really happened? That is, of course, another way of asking whether he was indeed divine rather than say a very good human being?

This particular miracle account has some features that look very strange if it were a fictitious story. Particularly significant is the fact that the miracle was not drawn to the attention of the main characters in the story. Neither the bride, the groom, the master of the banquet nor the disciples seem to have been told about it at the time! The master of the banquet gives credit to the bridegroom for keeping the best wine till last. Only the servants, it seems, knew what had *really* happened. No attention was drawn to Jesus as the *great worker of miracles*. The purpose of its inclusion in John’s gospel is as a sign or a pointer to Jesus as the one who brings the glorious messianic age – symbolised by the great banquet, something that would have been very obvious to Jewish people who were familiar with their prophets. But the miraculous aspect is almost incidental! So, the question arises – would an invented story would take such a shape? On the other hand, a very low-key “teaching miracle” at the beginning of Jesus ministry makes a lot of sense given that his more overt works of power were highly provocative to the religious authorities. Many people think that the notion of it being an invented story raises questions that are much harder to answer.

The other gospel accounts of Jesus’ mighty works go a long way to explaining why he provoked such hostility. They record a steady growth in opposition as time went on. It’s especially notable that in Mark’s version of events, Jesus avoided drawing attention to his signs and wonders. It’s as if he is trying to restrain

the inevitable. John's gospel also records the raising of Lazarus as the last straw of provocation, precipitating the plot to arrest Jesus and try him for blasphemy – making himself equal to or claiming to be God. Those who dismiss the other miracles have a difficult task explaining what else it could have been that was so offensive to the religious establishment. These mighty deeds always had a significance. They were not intended to be “proofs of divinity”. They were visual aids, actions with a meaning. By raising Lazarus, Jesus was showing that he has power over death. Later of course, his own crucifixion and resurrection, something that he could never have contrived, was the supreme demonstration of this truth.

Such a line of response shows that if Jesus did not do these mighty works, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to explain why events worked out as they did. Interestingly later Jewish documents making reference to Jesus and his works did not deny that such things happened. Part of the Talmud, an early Jewish document known as 1 Sanhedrin 43 refers to “*Jesus the Nazarene who practiced magic and deceived and led Israel astray*”. So, it was the explanation of their significance rather than their historicity that was challenged.

But let us return briefly to the original question as it was raised. Do I *have* to believe that Jesus turned water into wine? Is it a *requirement*? Another line of response is to say that this is the wrong starting point for thinking about Jesus. The Christian faith, although it obviously does have assertions about things that happened, is not really a list of propositions or tenets to be “believed”. The starting point for Thomas, the doubter, was when he was confronted by the living Lord. He *met* the risen Jesus. It was very much the same for Saul, the persecuting Pharisee. He *met* the risen Jesus on the Damascus road. That changed everything including what he believed about him. Had they been asked about water into wine, they almost certainly would have said something along the lines: “...of course he did – he was God's son!”

People who have *met Jesus* and who have come to *experience* his reality whether as a “crisis – event” or a process over time, believe (that is *trust*) in him and also the exceptional things recorded about him. So, believing that Jesus turned water into wine is not so much a *requirement for Christians*, it is a *consequence* of coming to see and experience that Jesus Christ really is the Son of God, the risen Lord and Saviour!

Although Jesus is not with us today as a human being walking on earth, he is certainly alive, and the Holy Spirit makes him real to us. What happened at the Cana wedding is a pointer to something wonderful ahead; a new age pictured as the finest wine, compared with our present rather watery existence. More than that it points to the centrality of Jesus in this new age. He was pointing to himself as the bridegroom. Like many of the things recorded in John's gospel, it was only much later that the “penny dropped” as people pondered the question of *why would Jesus do such a thing? “What was he telling us?”* That is the question that the gospel writer is inviting us to consider and its answer has several layers of meaning.

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