

John's Gospel is known as a Gospel in which children can paddle and elephants can swim. The fact that John's Gospel operates on so many different levels in itself points to a Jewish way of reading scripture. A rabbinic approach would say that all Holy Scripture has layers of meaning. That you can go beyond a surface reading to explore other readings – symbolic readings, allegorical readings, and mystical readings. To explore these different layers brings Scripture to life as a multi-dimensional world, not just words on a page. It is to bring an excitement to reading Scripture that sees it as 'another universe' if you like, a complementary universe that speaks to and enriches the world we are living in.

Let's now take, as a rabbi would, **a symbolic approach** to our Gospel reading today. We read, verse 11, that "Jesus did this, the *first* of his signs". The miracle of the water turned into wine is the first sign that Jesus performs. There are seven signs in total in John's Gospel. Seven is the number of wholeness because God rests on the seventh day.

In the opening line of today's Gospel we read "*On the third day there was a wedding*". For Christians the third day is loaded with meaning. Similarly for the Jewish people the seventh day is also symbolically important. With a bit of detective work we discover that the wedding takes place on the seventh day since John's Gospel began.

Here at this wedding at Cana the day of resurrection *joins* the sabbath day. John began his Gospel echoing the start of Genesis, an account of the seven days of creation. Perhaps John is telling us that here, what happens now, on the seventh day is highly significant: this miracle at Cana isn't just one sign among many; it is the key to interpreting *all* of the signs that follow.

We have started with a symbolic approach. Let's now continue with **an allegorical approach**. We could ask whether this sign, this wedding, might be an allegory for the whole Gospel. What if the whole of John's Gospel is actually about a wedding? Something that will encourage us in this thinking is the fact that in the next chapter, John chapter 3, John the Baptist describes Jesus as the bridegroom and himself as the best man (*verses 29-30*).

So if Jesus is the bridegroom and John is the best man, then who is the bride? If you're a rabbi who likes to ask lots of questions this a really good question! It certainly makes reading John chapter 4 more interesting, when Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at a well. Reading these words from a Jewish perspective the book of Genesis has set us up to understand what happens when single men meet foreign women at wells...

The Samaritan woman says to Jesus "I don't have a husband". Why is she telling him that I wonder? Jesus responds, "That's right, you've had five husbands and the man you are with isn't your husband". It sets up another question: is Jesus going to be husband number 7? That symbolic number again. The Samaritan woman becomes a follower, a disciple of Jesus. If we read of the whole of John's Gospel allegorically, as "like a wedding", then perhaps *Jesus's disciples* are the bride? We will leave that question hanging for a bit and return to it.

Rabbi Akiva, a champion of the allegorical way of reading Scripture, said that the Song of Songs is the key to interpreting the whole of the Torah, the Hebrew Bible. The Song of Songs is a love song. If the Song of Songs is the key to interpreting all of Torah, it points to all of Scripture as describing a covenant of love, a marriage, between God and God's people Israel.

In a similar way the Gospel of John can also be read as being like a love song that culminates in a marriage. Taking this Jewish way of reading scripture we build on what we have learnt by taking a symbolic approach and an allegorical approach, and we come to **a mystical approach**. If John's Gospel can be read as a love song culminating in a marriage *when* does the marriage take place? John points us to the moment when Jesus is lifted up on the cross. This is *the transformative sign* for John of God covenanting himself afresh to us in love. What happens in Cana points to what happens on the cross. One sign is pointing to another sign: when we gaze upon the cross we see God's love for us – and that's *how* the water gets turned into wine.

A mystical reading of John's Gospel would say that when Jesus suffers on the cross, that's when the Word who was with God / and who was God / covenants himself to us in love. As Jesus himself says in John's Gospel, "I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself" (*John 12.32*). The cross is a transformative sign, it is the means by which Jesus brings transformation, and "turns water into wine".

Which brings us back to that question left hanging: "If Jesus is the bridegroom then who is the bride?" We can perhaps look at the most quoted verse of John's Gospel, John 3. 16, in a fresh light: "God so loved the world." We *don't* read "God so loved the disciples" or "God so loved the Church" but "God so loved *the world*". When Jesus suffers and dies upon the cross, that is when he covenants himself to the world in love. Its a covenant of love that goes far beyond the disciples to the whole world.

We return to the **theological understanding** of the wedding at Cana that we started with in my sermon today: God transforming our poverty, both as individuals and Churches, when celebration has run dry. We note this isn't a transformation that stops with us as individual disciples, or with the Church community. The wider perspective is always "God so loved *the world*".

I have tried reading these verses from John's Gospel today as a rabbi might read them. I have suggested that by looking at things from a wider perspective, an *allegorical* perspective - we can say that there are in fact *two* weddings going on in John chapter 2: alongside the physical blessing of a village wedding there is a greater celebration beginning, a sign of God's glory. A playful reading of scripture in this way produces this delightful irony: that when the wine runs out they go to the wrong bridegroom. When we take this really wide perspective, what in Jewish exegesis would be called a *mystical* reading of John's Gospel, we see that John's Gospel is about the marriage of heaven and earth – which happens on the cross. John the evangelist speaks good news to us: the world is a wedding feast and we are all invited.... every day is a wedding, every day we are invited afresh to participate in transformation, lockdown or no lockdown.