

Sermon given by Spencer Klavan, Lecturer in Greek Language and Literature, Magdalen College,

Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> January 2019

## On Impossibly Good Wine

### [John 2:1-11](#)

Over the Christmas holidays a friend of mine, who is not Christian, went home to visit his parents, who are. They — the parents — live lives of old-fashioned moral decency, and they do not approve of the fact that their son drinks alcohol. On this visit my friend, in frustration, informed his parents that even Jesus had a few drinks on occasion. He adduced a number of Biblical sources to prove his point — among them today's passage in which Jesus, during the late hours of a big party, miraculously produces something that sounds for all the world like an open bar.

I suspect my friend has a point, in support of which he might even have cited another verse from Luke (7:34) — wherein Christ himself notes that he 'came eating and drinking' into the world, and complains of being called a drunkard by his detractors. It would be blasphemy to suggest that our sinless Lord suffered from alcoholism, but it takes some very selective reading to insist that he didn't enjoy the odd glass of wine now and then. This is what my friends' parents did insist, loudly.

I am not telling you this so that we sophisticated urbanites can enjoy feeling superior to a kind and well-meaning couple. Actually I am pointing to this anecdote as an example of something that all Christians from all walks of life do in one way or another, whether consciously or unconsciously. We each have our own convictions about right and wrong: we derive these from some combination of intuition, reasoning, and education. Then our faith teaches us that Jesus was the one perfectly moral human being ever to live. So we infer, often tacitly, that Christ must behave exactly according to our rules. If we believe drinking is immoral, then we feel sure Jesus would have been abstemious, and never mind his rather manifest fondness for wine. If we think all aggression is wrong, then we imagine that Jesus must have practiced total pacifism — quite ignoring that, immediately after serving wine at this wedding, John tells us how the Messiah chased a gang of profiteers out of Jerusalem's temple brandishing a self-made whip ([John 2:13-25](#)).

We want to graft our personal beliefs about righteousness onto Jesus because, whether or not we admit it, we assume those beliefs are all correct. But, in fact, one major point of the incarnation must be that there are things about righteousness which we can't figure out on our own. There would be little reason for God to take

on flesh and insert himself bodily into our lives unless he had something to reveal that we did not already know. Jesus comes to us from beyond the confines of what we can understand and predict — *we* should come to *him*, then, expecting to have our assumptions challenged and our outlook expanded by what he says and does. We should come to him expecting to learn something new.

And indeed, Jesus wrong-foots almost everyone in this story. First he apparently dismisses his mother's request for more wine with the cryptic saying that “my hour has not yet come” (verse 3). But then he furnishes wine after all, producing it instantly from water in a way that defies all scientific explanation, using jars that are set apart for a purification ritual (verses 6-9). The master of ceremonies is oblivious to the transformation, but even he is bewildered: such excellent vintage, he says, is never produced at this late hour, when most people would cut costs and serve the cheap stuff to drunken guests (verses 9-10). This is luxury and abundance where there shouldn't be any, served far later than is customary, and yet also somehow unseasonably early. John calls it the first ‘sign,’ a distant foretaste and a symbolic picture of what God will at last accomplish on the cross (verse 11). It defies every human system we use to keep things orderly and predictable — social custom, religious orthodoxy, even the laws of physics.

What are we to make of such a God? We might wish we could fold him neatly back into another set of rules and conventions, but he will thwart us at every turn. There is no coming to Jesus for pat lessons about temperance or even piety, wholesome and edifying as such lessons may be. He ‘fulfills’ the law — that fearsome moral and religious code followed so rigidly by his contemporaries — and in so doing he demonstrates the inadequacy of all such systems to give an exhaustive account of what it is to be human. Christ, alone of all men, perfectly obeys every one of God's commands, and yet finds himself tried and condemned to death as a criminal by self-satisfied moralists like you and me.

And in that, perhaps, we find the ‘something extra’ that God has to communicate to us: not a new set of better rules, but the deep and heartfelt realisation that, no matter how good our rules, we will fail to follow them. In fact, the more perfect our plans and schemes for organising life, the more dramatically we will fall short of their proper execution. It is no accident that those political and social programs which promise the most utopian vision are those that most routinely end in bloodshed and depravity of a grotesquely public kind. Christ comes to teach us — to show us, so we feel it — that it is not our rules which need fixing. It is us.

And yet, if the unpredictability of this miracle illuminates humanity's common problem, the nature of it proclaims the solution. Our deviation from the good is one of lacks and inadequacies: we do not bring as much wine to the party as will satisfy our guests. We forget to visit or even write to our sick friends. We care painfully less than we should for our brothers and sisters who sleep on the streets. But Jesus shows he will answer that shortfall with a superfluity all his own. He will not only

bleed us, but will do so even before it is strictly time to. He will not only fulfill the law, but will suffer the death of us who disobey it. He will not only purify us with water, but will make our vessels overflow with wine — with astonishing, improbably excellent wine that gladdens the heart.

When he dies at our hands, John suggests, Christ at last overflows with an excess that will cover even our most abject need. We drink from the cup of that excess here today, from the true and supernatural wine of Christ's blood that was only prefigured at that wedding in Cana. Come to this table, drink, and know: no matter your errors and your shortcomings, no matter how you have defied God or disappointed yourself, this is wine that cancels your debt. It is wine that should not be here, that frustrates and scandalises those who would condemn you for your flaws or judge you by your missteps. Miraculously transcending all such human condemnation, this wine signifies that you are divinely forgiven and set free. Come and drink: it is better wine than we could possibly have expected.