

Sermon – Epiphany 3 2018: Genesis 14:17-20/Revelation 19: 6-10; John 2:1-11

We are reminded at the start of this morning's Gospel reading that John's account of Jesus's life, the Fourth Gospel, marks time very carefully, but simultaneously looks towards eternity. Throughout the Gospel we are told when and where things occur – it's winter, or it's six days later and there's a supper party at Bethany. In today's reading, at Cana, it is the third day, and there is a wedding. What is this third day?

John has been counting the days since his account of Jesus's ministry began, he says repeatedly on the next day this happened, on the *next* day that. A total of four days pass in this way from the start of the book; and now three more days make seven since the story began.

John is marking time carefully but with an eye on eternity.

The story is obviously symbolic: on the seventh day of creation, in the story in Genesis, God rests from all he has done and rejoices in the goodness of all that has been made. We are being told: this first sign of Jesus's, which celebrates creation with a wonderful superabundance of wine, hundreds of litres of wine, shows God's presence rejoicing alongside us in the world God made. God is present *with* us now.

The story is obviously symbolic: on the third day Jesus rises from the dead, to complete creation in a new way, pouring out his Spirit on us all. God is present *in* us now. John Marks time with an eye on eternity.

But what started this counting of days? In common with the other gospels, the clock starts not with Jesus but with John the Baptist. It's his baptism of Jesus which sets things going; for Jesus, John's baptism of him was the moment he saw with new clarity what he needed to do with his life, and set about doing it. So as well as marking time carefully, while looking towards eternity, John's Gospel presents a nuanced and complex portrait of Jesus – while repeatedly declaring him to be Lord, to be God with us. He didn't come from nowhere, he needed to find his way, he was open to the influence of others, he was like you and me, John shows us all this.

When we get baptised, whether as infants or when older, it's something that for us marks the start of finding our way in the world in a new way, working out what we're here for and how we should live. If we're infants our godparents promise to help us do this. But anyway, our own baptisms are about our setting out to live lives which are good for us and good for the people around us, as Jesus's baptism was for him. But following the baptism at John's hands, so now at the wedding in Cana it is starting to become clear who this Jesus is, that he is Lord of creation.

John's Gospel is also a book with a clear authorial voice at the service of someone else's story. The best bits, in some ways, are the asides. We hear one of them today, when the writer comments "(though the servants who had drawn the water knew)". The punctuation you will find in your Bible is an interpretation of the text but it *is* clear that the writer speaks for himself at times, commenting on the events he is remembering and portraying. The most striking is when he corrects Jesus's own words.

In chapter 7, Jesus confidently asserts: "Moses gave you circumcision..." but the writer cannot resist – quite rightly – in commenting: "(it is, of course, not from Moses, but from the patriarchs)". The most moving example is when, during the Last Supper, we are told that no one else at the table knew why Jesus said to Judas Iscariot "Do quickly what you are going to do" when he gave him a piece of bread.

So, the author of the Fourth Gospel puts himself at the disposal of someone else's story, but can't help providing some personal insights along the way.

Those personal insights depend on the relationship the author has to Jesus himself. And this Gospel again consistently celebrates relationship – today, the relationship of Jesus to his mother, at his baptism the relationship of Jesus to John the Baptist. Centrally, the relationship of Mary Magdalene to Jesus. The Gospel celebrates human relationships but sees also that such relationships are fragile and at risk. In today's reading Jesus rebukes his mother, irritated it seems by the way she looks to him for a solution to a social

embarrassment, not knowing that out of that will come the first of his signs. Mary had no idea what asking her admired and brilliant son to sort some fresh wine would start to reveal.

And at the core of John's Gospel, like those of Mark and Matthew and Luke, is the mortal danger in which our human nature places our relationships. Jesus's message is in a central way all about the essential value of human beings having right relationships with each other and with God; but death fundamentally challenges both. So, at the core of the Gospel is the claim that Jesus has enabled our fragile relationships to undergo the worst that could occur in the death that ends them – and yet survive. This is a book that celebrates relationships – seeing that they are fragile and at risk – but ultimately proclaims that loving relationships have eternity on their side.

Because, above all, the Fourth Gospel is a book which acknowledges, from beginning to end, that what we crave as human beings is to love and be loved. Whatever else I believe, I am convinced that our only real purpose is to love, and be loved. And one of the reasons why I think John's Gospel is such a profoundly truthful and authentic book is that it argues that in fulfilling this most human of desires we come as close as we can to knowing God, and to becoming godlike ourselves. Amen.