

# Sermon on Sunday 19 January 2025

by Rev. Alan Stewart

*Gospel Reading: John 2. 1-11*

## Real life

Imagine you're hosting a dinner party, a la '*Come Dine With Me*', and you can invite four celebrity guests, alive or dead; who would you invite?

While you're thinking about that, my list would definitely be the singer Nick Cave, the comedian Bob Mortimer, the rugby player Joe Marler and National Trinket, the Rev. Richard Coles.

I wonder how many of us would dare to invite ex-carpenter and Saviour of the World, Jesus Christ?

Imagine that dinner party? Many of us would understandably feel fairly self-conscious in the presence of divinity - a bit like sitting opposite a mind reader or an expert in body language. We would possibly adapt our language and behaviour a bit. Would there be

lots of laughter, do you think, or would it all be terribly serious?  
Most importantly, could we be ourselves?

What is our picture of Jesus, anyway?

A few Christmases ago, my son bought me a T-shirt with a picture of Jesus looking round the corner with the slogan 'I saw that'.

Is Jesus a killjoy or a meek and mild Mr. Nice Guy? Maybe he's an asexual guru or a religious nutter with a martyr complex?

'What is our picture of Jesus?'

In the episode we read about today, Jesus is the guest at a dinner party; a wedding party to be more precise, which in that culture would have lasted for four or five days at least. Was he standing on the sidelines occasionally rolling his eyes disapprovingly, or was he in the thick of the celebrations... we're not told. We are given this snippet of dialogue, however, between him and his mother, which at first glance seems a bit rude, but probably gets lost a bit in translation. Mary, it seems, must have been close to the newlyweds as she is in possession of the insider news that - shock

horror! - the wine is about to dry up. Now, in that culture that's social suicide; a disgrace upon the family. So, Mary shares this with Jesus thinking either that her son might be able to work a miracle in the hospitality department, or expecting him to send a couple of the disciples to the nearest off-licence?

Whatever Mary knew or expected, Jesus takes the opportunity to perform his first public miracle.

He gets the servants to fill up some huge stone jars with water. Now, these jars had a particular purpose in Jewish ritual - they were used for ceremonial washing. In a communion service, a priest will often do something similar before he consecrates the bread and wine.

For me, that's a gesture of respect, but for the Jews at the time of Jesus there was a deeply held conviction that certain things could stain or contaminate a human being, make them unacceptable to God, and therefore a form of cleansing was necessary.

Jesus turns *this* water into wine... the best wine money could buy! And there's plenty of it. Experts estimate it's the equivalent of

2,400 glasses of the stuff; enough to get a whole village plastered.

Was that just a compassionate response to spare the blushes of some friends or a belated wedding gift to the happy couple? Or did this miracle have some deeper significance or meaning? The writer of the gospel John seems to think so - he calls it the first *sign*.

Weddings and wine were heavily symbolic in that religious tradition. For centuries, the prophets had spoken of a time to come where God would wed his people; in other words, He would foster a deep and loving relationship with them. They called this the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God, and in this kingdom - guess what? - wine would flow freely.

To the Jewish mind, wine equalled joy - 'God gave wine to make the heart glad,' as one Psalm says. A time of great joy is coming. For those who have eyes to see what Jesus was doing, that time has now come.

Going back to our picture of Jesus, it's really important not to make Jesus in our own image; project our ideas of goodness and humanitarianism and niceness onto him. The portrait we have in

scripture often actually keeps us guessing; just when we think we have him sussed, he does or says something surprising.

We in the Church have, I think, very successfully managed to put Jesus onto a kind of celestial pedestal which hovers a few feet above ground level. We talk of him being perfect and that, I think, makes him unapproachable and hard to relate to. Reverence, of course, is due - he is the Holy One, the Son of God. But Jesus' perfection wasn't so much to do with his lack of imperfection but instead the degree of integrity he had. His holiness is way of saying he was whole, w h o l e.

He must have been irritable and tired and difficult at times, just like the rest of us. He was, after all, a human being. The difference is, he was a human being who was fully alive. But, what does that mean - to be fully alive?

I don't know if any of you remember a drama series called '*Being Human*'. It's the unlikely tale of a werewolf, a ghost and a vampire whose lives are thrown together in a flat in Bristol. It's really a study, as the title suggests, of what it means to be human, because each of them has lost and is in search of their humanity.

At one point, the ghost says: 'My name is Annie Claire Sawyer and two years ago I died, but in so many ways that's when my life began. In the company of horrors, I learnt about friendship and loyalty, sacrifice and courage. Humanity isn't a species; it's a state of mind. It can't be defeated, it moves mountains, it saves souls. We were blessed as much as we were cursed. In this little enclave of the lost I witnessed the very best of being human'.

To be fully alive is to be fully human; to be fully human is to be in relationship.

An early Saint, Irenaeus, wrote that the glory of God is a human being fully alive. Choosing to live to our true potential is not an egocentric journey about me, myself and I. It's a journey outward; a life lived in communion with others and in communion with our Source, the Ground of our Being; the one who made us unique and loves us uniquely.

There's a line in a movie where one of the characters says, 'Saying everyone is special is another way of saying no-one is special'. When someone like me says, 'God loves you', those words can sound trite. Love has become the most overused and least understood word in our language, mainly because words don't do it justice. Love is only understood when it is entered. We can only

know it if we step towards it, if we take that risk. There's nothing trite about God's love.

It understands our complexities and contradictions. It knows us. And to be known, fully known, is one of the most beautiful and powerful and liberating things.

Just as Jesus came to show us what a human being could be like, so he also came to show us what God is like. And the message he wanted those wedding guests, and us, to hear is this: God is not some distant, unfeeling, unapproachable out-there perfectionist. He is love; intimate, fun-loving, risk-taking love.

And that invitation is open to every one of us with no need to dress to impress. We simply come as we are, and that, in the words of Annie the ghost, is when life - real life - really begins.

