

## 5<sup>th</sup> February 2023 (John 2:1-12) – Life Stories #5 Mary’s Story: ‘Do whatever he tells you’

I wonder what the best wedding is that you’ve ever been to? The best wedding I’ve ever been to – and in my job I’ve been to a lot – is... well, obviously, *ours*. It was a fantastic day, I have to admit. But seeing some lovely friends this week reminded me of the other most joyful wedding I’ve ever been to.

Now I’ve been to some swanky dos in my time – one particularly notorious one involved the invitation arriving on a papyrus scroll, and the bride having no less than three dresses. I’ve been to ceremonies in stately homes, and many grade 1 or 2 listed mediaeval churches. This particular wedding took place on a cold March day in a modern church that looked like Tesco’s from the outside and was situated in suburban east London, not too far from West Ham’s old ground. In fact the groom was almost late, as he got held up by the football crowd traffic. But the service itself was amazing: the Spirit of the Lord was powerfully present, and to this day it is one of the few weddings I can still remember vividly.

Today is one of those famous stories that even much of our secular culture would know: Jesus’ visit to a wedding, where he changes water into wine. Most of you will know the story well – so **today, we’re going to focus on a particular character, and that is Jesus’ mother, Mary.**

Now one of the strange things about piecing together Mary’s story is that last week we left Mary leaving Jerusalem after her purification and the presentation of Jesus in the temple, at which point Jesus was 40 days old. Apart from the story of Jesus staying behind in Jerusalem and meeting the teachers of the law around the time of his bar-mitzvah, this passage in John is the next time we meet Mary. Jesus is now 30 and the gospels leave out all of his life in-between. We don’t see how Mary parents Jesus, or how her family grows so that Jesus has at least four siblings. All we know is that Mary is still very much part of Jesus’ life when his public ministry begins, and we can reasonably deduce that this is a family wedding invitation – maybe a cousin or somesuch – hence Jesus and Mary travel from their home to Cana to be part of the celebrations.

And today we’re going to look at **the two things that Mary says in the passage – each of which has something precious to say to us today.**

So, to set the scene: the wedding begins, but the family have committed what in Jewish culture was a grave social faux-pas – they’ve under-catered and so they’ve run out of wine. This would cause the kind of humiliation it would take decades to recover from, so this is not just a minor mistake, there are real pastoral concerns at play here.

And what does Mary do? She takes the hosts’ need to Jesus. It might sound the obvious thing, but this is more significant than it first appears. Mary has seen someone’s need and has brought it to Jesus – quietly, sensitively, but also directly and faithfully: ‘They have no more wine’ (v3).

**It is, in a way, a prayer – it’s what we’re all called to do as followers of Jesus. We see people’s needs and we bring them to Jesus.** They can be emotional, spiritual, physical or in (as in this case) immensely practical. And as we pray, so we utter the same word of faith, bringing it to the Lord.

But, as we may also find, Jesus’ first reply is unsettling: ‘My hour has not yet come’. Or, in other words, Jesus receives Mary’s request and says: ‘Not yet’. If you pray, you’ll have experienced this kind of answer at some point – we all have.

And 'not yet' is often the hardest of all answers to accept. We like a 'yes'; we don't like a 'no', but at least it's a clear outcome. Not yet is effectively a 'yes, but... wait'. In other words, the issue is timing, not the request or activity itself.

This tests our faith, and patience – as it must have done for Mary. And whilst we know how this story ends, let's pause to dwell for a moment at this point – *the 'not yet' moment*. There may be things for each of us where we feel God's answer has been 'not yet', and this causes us discomfort – perhaps literally. Let's seize faith today to believe that *God keeps on listening*. Human plans may fail, but God has not forgotten us. Jesus encourages us to keep praying in faith. Not yet can become a yes, in God's good time. Keep taking your needs, and others' needs to Jesus. This story reminds us that **Jesus is the one who provides. Jesus is the One who can do things others can't.** Take your 'not yet's' to him today and pray for more grace for the journey, and new hope.

**The second word Mary speaks is to the servants – and, again, it's a profound piece of advice for all of us: 'Do whatever Jesus tells you.'** That's not a bad maxim for life, is it? And it goes to the heart of the human condition. What *is* the best way to live? For all that we like to see ourselves as authors of our own destiny, in much of life we need people to point the way for us.

Nowadays, if we want to learn how to do something, many of us will go straight to Youtube, which (if you can switch off the videos of pets who look like famous people) is full of fantastic 'how to' videos. My son learnt how to play Pachelbel's Canon on the piano by watching Youtube. Alise makes all kinds of amazing crafts, having watched the 'how to' on Youtube. When I wanted to work out how we might go about livestreaming a service in church a couple of years ago, my first port of call was – you guessed it – Youtube. I found a fantastically helpful 15 minute video which told me exactly how to do it, step by step.

For life to work well, we have to admit that much of the time we need to do what somebody tells us. The trick is to follow the right lead, the right set of instructions. In the wedding at Cana, Mary gives us a profound insight into one of the deepest truths of all human existence. It might only be a party, and the problem might only be a shortage of wine (although as we've noted that was a big deal in that culture), but her advice to the servants is one which all of us would do well to listen to: *'Do whatever Jesus tells you.'* If the key to life is following the right lead, the right instructions, then the Son of God is probably the obvious go-to place. Not even Youtube can beat that!

And yet, whilst it seems so simple in theory, in practice it can be challenging. We face so many voices, so many competing ideas – hearing Jesus' voice and then choosing to obey it can sometimes be unexpectedly hard. It's why we need to keep going back to the bible, to the gospels, to hear the authentic voice of Jesus speak. And the more we soak in those truths, the more we also get to make good judgements about things which aren't directly addressed in Scripture.

**Perhaps today you face a decision. This passage gives us the best advice we could ever receive: do whatever Jesus tells you.** And if that's not clear yet, take a few moments to pray for Jesus' wisdom and guidance. However big or small, it's *his* direction we need. And he has the power and authority to help you face the outcome. His water can be our fine wine. May his presence and peace guide you, that you might follow Mary's advice and see God's extraordinary activity in your life. Keep taking your and others' needs to Jesus – and then do whatever he tells you. Amen.