



# *Second Sunday after Epiphany*

## *Sermon by Revd Margaret Place*



Sunday 16 January 2022

### READINGS

Isaiah 62: 1-15; Psalm 36: 5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2: 1-11

## *Mary, Jesus' mother*

There was a time when the gospel reading today was one often chosen for weddings. I suppose we can understand why, but the events are not about marriage, it's about the celebration which occurs at the wedding, a celebration in which things go wrong and Jesus saves the day. Many interpret this purely with theological symbolism, stating the wedding is the world - the occasion for rejoicing because God is our creator, and we are all joined together in celebration. But the world is not perfect – the wine running our represents our sin – the lack we show which hinders the joy we would express. Mary is the praying people who brings the problem to the Saviour, Jesus, and he uses the servants – who represent the church on earth and who serve the world. Their obedience takes the purifying water, and it has been used by Jesus to become a very good quality wine. That certainly fits well, and I'm sure we learn a lot from this way of reading this miracle story.

I would like to focus on it a little differently. I want to look at Jesus' mother, Mary and see how her story, as the person closest to Jesus, works out. She was his mother, from the annunciation until we see her praying with the disciples in the first chapter of the book of Acts. After that, we don't know what happens to her. But if we look at all the Mary stories, a picture emerges.

When, in the very beginning, she is told by the angel she is with child, she has some questions – possibly a bit uncertain “How can this be since I have known no man?” and then she accepts what God has asked her to do. She goes to Elizabeth, and the two women affirm each other in the special role God has given each one's child. Here, confident in her calling, she expressed her praise to God in the Magnificat. Every expectant mother who takes her mothering role seriously, has something of this – a sense of wonder at what God has done, the miracle of life growing within her, and a picture of how this child is going to change the world. We can see and do acknowledge the God dimension in this pregnancy, but if Jesus was fully human and fully divine, can we not see the same characteristics in his mother too?

Later we have the visit to the temple when Jesus was twelve. Just to explain what happened here, in 1st century Judaism, men and women did most things separately. Mary would have been walking with the women of her town, and Joseph and the menfolk would have been walking where they could protect them but also where they would talk of those things which only men ever discussed. The children tended to go with their mothers, but Jesus at 12 would have been between childhood and adolescence so Joseph probably thought he was with his mom and the kids, and Mary would have thought her little boy was growing up and wanted to be with the men. We know the consternation when it was discovered he was with neither and he was discovered back at the temple in discussion with the teachers of the law. His

reply to his parents' expression of concern was, that they shouldn't have been worried, because, as he put it "didn't you know I had to be in my father's house?" Here we have Jesus beginning to follow his messianic calling, but also, as we see in almost every well-brought-up adolescent, the first glimmerings of looking at or for his adult identity – the purpose of his life. Many teenagers have no idea what they want to do, but almost all at some stage explore this or that or look at this or that role model and try out different careers and different personalities in their minds. Jesus knew his destiny, but went home with his parents and was obedient to them. But there is definitely a movement away from home. He has a glimpse of a life beyond the provincial safety of Nazareth, and for a brief time took his place amongst those who were taken up entirely with the things of God and God's law, as he will do as part of his destiny. His mother, as every parent does, became aware that he was growing up, and would ultimately move away from her and out from under her influence. But he is still young, and he goes home to be the dutiful son.

A similar scenario exists in today's gospel. They are at a wedding, and a wedding where things go wrong. To run out of wine does not mean a quick clandestine trip to the supermarket, but it means that someone made a mistake, and would have to be held accountable. The bridegroom's family would demand answers from the master of the banquet, and he would look to those under his authority for answers. The servants would be terrified they would be made scapegoats, so this was quite a crisis. Jesus' mother must have had a close connection with the family, more than just a guest, because she actually heard about the secret problem. Someone confided in her.

She then broke a few rules. In orthodox Jewish weddings, men and women are in the same room, but they sit and dance separately. So Jesus' mother speaking to her son was approaching one of the men – on their side of the room. Not done! Then she didn't actually ASK Jesus to do anything – she merely told him the problem. Jesus' power must have previously shown itself but he rebuked his mother. "This isn't the time – not yet". His ministry was still in the future. But his mother instructs the servants to obey Jesus. When do you give instructions to somebody else's servants? Nevertheless the servants did obey Jesus and filled the six jars with water. The rest you know. So here we have a similar confrontation. Jesus trying to be answerable only to God, but his mother doesn't think the boundaries apply to her – and anyway, a family is in trouble! Again, we have all known this. Sometimes we want our adult children to make donations to charities of our choice, or we want them to use their skills to fix someone else's house and after the first time, they have to say quite firmly, they are employed by an owner or manager, and their contract lies with them. Too much of this family getting involved, and we find ourselves with a version of the sort of corruption our country is dealing with at the moment. In spite of the virtual confrontation, Jesus and the disciples go back home with his mother for a few days.

The next time we see Jesus' mother is a story in all the other three Gospels where his mother and brothers interrupt his teaching to ask him to come and speak to them. Perhaps they are worried about what he is saying, or they just want to see him. Here Jesus is more definite. His mother and brothers are those who do the will of God according to his teaching.

Something of a slap in the face, we feel. Why is Jesus so rude? It appears he has to get the message across, that he is here to build a kingdom and the citizens of that kingdom are all those who live their lives according to his teaching, some of which was rather revolutionary. In Matthew's Gospel he says, anyone who loves family more than Jesus is not worthy of following him. Rather harsh, but these readings tell us two things. Firstly, Jesus has come to earth to fulfil his messianic calling, and nothing must get in the way. Secondly, this is a lesson to all of us who belong to a family, or work in what is described as a firm with family values. These values can become the wrong sort of protective. Young people must be given good education and upbringing, but ultimately, they must be left free to do whatever they have been called to

do. We worry about them, and our greater experience can see trouble on the horizon and we long to protect them, but it's their life and their calling and the results, good or bad, are theirs too.

The last time we see Jesus' mother is standing at the cross. Here she is totally helpless. Nothing she can do or say will change anything, and when Jesus gives her over to the care of the "disciple whom he loved," he is caring for her, but he is also separating from her in that final way only death brings about. Even though the resurrection happened, we see in the book of the Acts of the apostles, she joins the disciples in praying and partaking of communion. They now have become her family.

So to go back to today's Gospel. What can we learn from it? Firstly, we see here something that often happens in Jesus' miracles. Those wanting his help ask for it. Or if they can't, someone asks on their behalf. Jesus is very unlikely to interfere. I think the raising of the son of the widow of Nain is the only example of Jesus taking the initiative, but mostly, he works by invitation. Prayer is important, because we are asking Jesus to become involved in our problems.

Secondly, we work for God, and ultimately everything we do we will have to relinquish at some time. To hang on to a ministry or to hang on to a person will be to stifle growth. We put our all into what we do, but ultimately everything and everyone has their own wheels and will go their own way, and it has to be like that. Even children who go horribly wrong, invariably are saved by someone other than their parents even after a family intervention. Parenting is only for a time.

And thirdly, Jesus' role in this wedding was known only by his mother and the servants. Jesus uses others to do his work. He initiates it and causes the miracle, but if the servants hadn't done this crazy thing – filling washing pots with water then putting it into cups and finding –oh wow – it's now wine, nothing would have changed. Sometimes doing basic things well is all that Jesus wants. He will deal with the impossible, but it won't happen unless we are faithful, even if, like his mother, we break a few social rules along the way.

So let us give ourselves to God at the beginning of this year. Let us bring all the troubles of the world to him, but let us also be obedient to him, either to take up a calling, or to relinquish something or someone we can no longer help. God is already in the days that lie ahead. Let us go freely, curiously, and in faith that in Christ all will work together for good for those who love God.