

Opening Sign: Water Turns to Wine

John 2:1–12 (by Phillip McFadyen)

We have noticed that John is keen to provide a number of clues or pointers as to the identity of Jesus. Here we have the first official 'sign' (v. 11). It occurs in the company of Jesus' disciples and in the presence of his mother. The only other reference to a gathering of this kind is found in Acts 2 when Mary and the disciples are together in the upper room about to be filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. There are a number of links—both stories are about new beginnings and both use the image of wine to suggest the joyful spirit of the Gospel. The results are intoxicating. The generous provision is spectacular and overwhelming.

A wedding is itself a celebration of a new beginning. John tells us that this one also took place on 'the third day', another reference to the resurrection story. The disciples have been promised an open heaven (v. 51). Now they are witnessing the marriage of heaven and earth in the actions of Jesus as he reluctantly provides them with a sign of who he is. Again we seem to hear Markan echoes in the text of John. In Mark, Jesus is so reluctant to disclose his identity that the term 'Messianic Secret' has been coined to describe his reticence. Jesus is less reticent in John, but his reluctance here is explained in terms of 'his hour not yet having come'. This phrase is also used in Mark, when it refers to the passion of Jesus in which the true nature of God's love will be displayed. For John this is described in terms of 'glorification'. Jesus in this passage is not ready for that sort of identification, so he resists his mother's attempt to push him forward too soon. There is a tension between disclosure and hiddenness which is developed throughout this Gospel. Jesus will often play a game of 'hide and seek' with those who are looking for him.

There is a hint of irritation between mother and son here which may also be noticed in Luke's story of the finding in the temple (Luke 2:48) and in the odd story in Mark when his mother and brothers try to restrain him (Mark 3:31). It is certain that Mary, who is not named in John, precipitates this disclosure as Jesus reluctantly turns water into wine in vast quantities, equivalent to two to three thousand modern wine glasses!

Mark has a reference to wine in the context of new and old wineskins (Mark 2:22). The same theme is dealt with here. This story is a sign that what Jesus represents is far richer and more significant than anything that was tasted under the old dispensation—indicated by the six stone jars of purification (v. 6). The best wine has been kept until now (v. 10). For now, the Word has been made flesh and dwells among us. The enriching, challenging, joyful presence of God in Jesus is present at a country wedding. This is cause for great celebration and will result in a disclosure. The disciples who see what this sign signifies believe in him, and this will eventually burst the old wineskins. This sign points to the coming break between the infant Church and Judaism. Intoxicated by the Spirit, the new community of faith will break with the old ways of Judaism.

Phillip McFadyen, [*Open Door on John: A Gospel for Our Time*](#) (London: Triangle, 1998), 10–11.