

## **Epiphany 2. 17.1.2016 St Faith Havant (nb 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of episcopal ordination)**

*“Do whatever he tells you.”*

These are the last recorded words of Mary in the New Testament.

When the wine ran out at the wedding party it was Mary who first brought this to Jesus’ attention and Mary who told the waiters to do what Jesus told them.

What he told them to do was remarkable partly because the six stone jars he told them to fill with water had been provided for ritual washing rather than drinking.

They were also very large.

It seems as if St John, who always has a subtext, wants us to understand that Jesus is thoroughly cleansing what has gone before, and is doing so in a thoroughly profligate manner.

Then of course, when the contents were tested they had become fine wine. Already in the Old Testament, fine wine had been a sign of God’s kingdom. So alongside purification and generosity, the presence and activity of Jesus means that God’s reign has begun

There’s quite a lot beneath the surface of this apparently straightforward story.

It was, we are told, the first sign by which Jesus revealed his glory and made his disciples believe in him.

Actually St John says even more than that: he described it not so much as the *“first of Jesus’ signs”*, but as the *“beginning of his signs”* - the source, the origin, the point of departure.

Seen like this, Mary’s role here was not simply to prompt Jesus to solve a social problem nor even to perform a miracle - in any case, there is nothing to show she had any idea what he would do - the result of what Mary said and Jesus did was nothing less than the beginning of a new world.

This wasn’t the first time Mary had opened the way for God to reveal his purpose in Jesus.

Just think of when the angel of the Lord declared unto Mary and she conceived by the Holy Spirit or of when Jesus stayed behind in the temple at the end of the annual pilgrimage. In

both cases Mary raised an awkward question, “*How can this be since I’m a virgin?*” and “*Why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been frantically looking for you.*”

In both cases the answer unfolds the mystery of God’s plan. “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the most high will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the son of God.*” And “*Why were you looking for me? Didn’t you know I have to be about my father’s business?*” So too, here: “*They have run out of wine.*” “*Woman, why bother me with that? My hour has not yet come.*”

In every case, Mary’s role was to open the way for God to act.

There is a famous icon called *She who shows the way*. Mary holds the infant Jesus with her arm, while her right hand is pointing to him. That is her task. So here, after telling the servants to do what Jesus tells them, the NT records no other word from her lips.

*“Do whatever he tells you.”*

What Mary says to the servants, she also says to us. Just as at the beginning in Cana, great things can happen, will happen, if we do what Jesus tells us.

But that of course invites the question “How?” After all, we can’t hear Jesus speaking in our ears like those servants.

Well, he speaks to us in the Bible and the rest of the Church’s teaching over the years; much of what he says is general advice or wisdom for everybody. His famous sermon on the mount speaks to all his disciples both then and throughout the ages: “*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*”, “*Judge not that you be not judged*” and so on. St Jerome once wrote “*If you don’t know the scriptures, you don’t know Christ.*” We shouldn’t regard the Bible as simply an old book to be looked back to, but as a source of living guidance.

But we want rather more than that. We want to be able to hear a more personal word, something that speaks to us as individuals.

We need something like the way Jesus spoke to particular individuals as he perceived what they needed. To the rich young man: “*Go, sell what you have and give to the poor ....and come, follow me*”, or to someone paralysed “*Rise, take up your bed and go home.*” Even today, banal though it may seem, “*Fill the jars with water.*”

So what about us, you and me?

Jesus can speak to us as he wants whenever wants and how he wants, but there is a lot we can do to enable us to hear him. Close friends and lovers often find that over the years they hear each other's voices before a word has been spoken

Mary is relevant here once again. Thirty years before, when the angels and shepherds had left the stable, St Luke tells us that Mary “*kept all these things and pondered them in her heart*”. The word translated “pondered” has the same root as our word “symbol” - it means throwing things together, allowing them to interact. It’s a more active image than merely dreaming about things. Mary wouldn’t let go of the wonderful but confusing things that had happened to her, but hung on to them and tried to make sense of them. It was much the same after that painful conversation with the twelve-year old Jesus, as that she “*kept all these things in her heart*”.

Mary’s patient waiting, her loving care for Jesus and her pondering on what it all meant enabled her with complete confidence to tell the servants at the wedding feast to do whatever he told them.

There are for us no short cuts to hearing what Jesus tells us. There is no substitute for our, like Mary, having patiently, lovingly and ponderingly (if there is such a word) waited for him to make himself clear. Countless disciples over the years have proved the truth of this. So as well as reading the Bible you need to trust that the Jesus of the Bible is the same Jesus who, in his own words *is with us until the end of the world* and who promised that he would abide in us and we in him. Trust him even if you do not see him. If with your heart and mind tuned in this way you can be confident that you will get the guidance you need. Perhaps a very simple prayer for every morning might be “*Lord, let me know what I ought to do today*” and then “*do whatever he tells you.*”

*John Hind*  
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