

**Hymns:**

- 134 Christ whose glory fills the skies**
- 496 God beyond our dreams**
- 546 Behold the servant of the Lord**
- 701 Heaven shall not wait**
- 661 Give me the faith which can remove**

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**Readings:**

- Isaiah 62.1-5**
- John 2.1-11**

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Wesley's Chapel 20<sup>th</sup> January 2019: Susanna Wesley 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

Certain experiences in life carry with them certain expectations...

- If you move from the south east of England to live in Glasgow – as we did three years ago – you expect the weather to be colder and wetter!
- If you go to Kentucky Fried Chicken for a meal, you expect to be served quickly (although this was not always the case when we lived in the Caribbean, I have to admit!)
- If you go to see the brilliant film “Bohemian Rhapsody” you expect to hear the music of Queen!
- If you listen to the news, you expect to hear the word “Brexit” in the first few sentences...
- If you come to worship at Wesley's Chapel you expect...?? I think I'll let you tell me the answer to that!
- If you go to a wedding, you expect there to be plenty of food and plenty of wine for the celebrations...

This strange little story, told to us by John alone of the four gospel writers, is only included because this was the time when the expectations weren't met. The wine ran out – a serious miscalculation, or act of miserliness, an over-enthusiastic village, or just plain embarrassment for the hosts. But if all had gone as it should have gone, we probably wouldn't have heard of Cana at all... (...and maybe some of you are thinking that wouldn't be a great loss – it can be a tricky story for Methodists; I remember the late great Donald English preaching on this and saying that we would really have much preferred Jesus to do the miracle the other way round...!)

But, when the unexpected happened, Jesus and his mother were there and that led to some very interesting developments.

Mary also has expectations – it's hard to tell from the few sentences in which the story is told exactly what Mary expected. Remember, we haven't had the feeding of the 5,000 yet, but maybe Mary knows things we don't know about Jesus and she certainly seems to expect

that he is able to do something in this situation. Ignoring Jesus's somewhat harsh words to her, she tells the servants to "Do whatever he tells you".

Of course, mothers do often have expectations of their children... maybe all of us have felt the burden, as well as the blessing, of our mothers' expectations during our lifetimes...?! Susanna Wesley, we know, had expectations of her son John. Particularly after the fire at Epworth Rectory in 1709 when the five or six year old John (known then as Jacky) was dramatically rescued from an upper floor window, she viewed him as having been saved for a special purpose. Drawing on her wide knowledge of the Bible, she borrowed a phrase from the prophet Zechariah who, in chapter 3, verse 2, describes the high priest Joshua's appearance in a vision as "a brand plucked from the burning" and henceforth she applied that graphic idea to John, believing that God had snatched him from the fire in order to use him in a special way – and of course, in that, she was not wrong!

We all come to life with various expectations – some are met, some are not.

But there is a tension in this wedding at Cana too – when Mary broaches the subject of the shortage of wine, Jesus's initial response is not encouraging; "What is that to you and to me? My time has not yet come". We get the impression that he doesn't want to do anything about it, he doesn't want to get involved, but it's almost as if he can't help himself (we'll come back to that in a moment).

Let's just pause to consider this moment of tension between Jesus and his mother. I'm glad of this little interchange, even if it is difficult to fathom. I'm not just glad of it because there were times in my mother's long life of 95½ years when there was tension between us, but because, if I'm honest, there is sometimes a bit of tension between me and Jesus – I wonder if you know what I mean?

Expectations – especially wrong ones – can lead to tension. Like Mary, we too approach Jesus with expectations, which are not always in tune with what Jesus wants to do; in our prayers we tell Jesus what we think should be done for the people for whom we pray; in our church business meetings we can't understand why Jesus doesn't make everyone else agree with us; in our activities outside church we, like the disciples at times, feel that a few well-aimed thunder bolts or lightning strikes would not go amiss!

And if Mary sometimes doesn't quite 'get' Jesus and we sometimes don't quite 'get' Jesus, how true also of the church – both as a worldwide movement and as a local gathering – how often do we not quite 'get' Jesus in the way we behave, the things we plan, the priorities we fix.

There are tensions in every family; we won't go into the relationship between Susanna and Samuel now! But we know that Susanna and John did not always see eye to eye. Many of their disagreements are catalogued in their correspondence – and some are well-known, such as their dispute over the acceptance of lay preachers and of women preachers. John wanted to play by the rules, but his mother chastised him and challenged him to broaden his thinking and see God's hand at work. (I should think so!) It's not an exact parallel to what we read in John 2 and I don't want to suggest it is, nor to labour this point, but I want to consider the possibility that a little tension, well handled, can be a good thing! Tension can lead to creativity. A little constructive tension may sharpen up our thinking, focus our priorities, stimulate us to dig a deeper into the personality of Jesus Christ and discover new ways of thinking and seeing and living and loving. Perhaps.

Because the remarkable thing is that, despite this possible mismatch between what Jesus wanted to do and what his mother wanted him to do, Jesus does act. He tells the servants to fill six huge jars with water and then he tells them to draw some of the water and take it

to the chief steward whose comments are recorded for us by John, so that we might know the full extent of the transformation.

For that is the heart of this little story, the abundant, over-the-top, indisputable transformation which takes place when Jesus gets involved. Water becomes wine; the ordinary, everyday becomes the special (and not just any old supermarket £5-a-bottle wine, but extraordinary, superior, vintage wine – a wine for connoisseurs; the best wine.) Perhaps the quality of the wine is, for us, the least surprising element of the story, for we know from the earliest pages of the bible that what God does, God does well. (e.g. Genesis 1:4 “and God saw that it was good”)

Whatever Mary expected, I can't think that it was this – 180 gallons of the highest quality wine. It's over the top. It's almost laughable, it's almost a joke! It's almost as if Jesus is pulling her leg – you think I can do something here, Mother? Just watch me!

I must admit I smiled when I discovered that this is the appointed Gospel passage for today – Jen had kindly said I didn't have to stick with the lectionary, I could choose any passage I liked for this special anniversary... what an awesome task! I decided I should at least look at the lectionary first, and what did I find? A story about a mother and a son which resulted in transformation on a grand scale... it couldn't have been better.

Of course the reason we are given this passage today – even though we are really in a year of Luke in our lectionary cycle at the moment – is because Christmas has not quite departed yet – not until the Presentation of Christ in the temple at Candlemas on 2<sup>nd</sup> February do we really have to pack away all the fairy lights...

Meanwhile something of that blaze of glory which was the incarnation still lingers around us; we can still smell the frankincense, still detect the sparkling of the star, for we are still hanging onto the coat-tails of the season of Epiphany; the celebration not just of the magi at the manger, but of Christ's light shining out to the whole world and this is one example of that.

John describes it as the “first” of the signs by which Jesus revealed his glory. I said a few moments ago, it's almost as if Jesus can't help himself... and I rather warm to that idea. The light and the glory of God is so distilled in Jesus that it's almost like a bottle of champagne (I'm getting my metaphors mixed up here I know!) which can't be stoppered, can't be restrained, can't be held back, can't be contained – ‘it will flame out’ (as Gerard Manley Hopkins expressed it in his poem ‘God's Grandeur’), ‘it will flame out, like shining from shook foil’.

As we enter each new year, and particularly as we enter this special anniversary new year, we do so in the light of the season of Epiphany and we are charged with the task of noticing God's glory shining out around us – in a sunrise or a night sky, in a winter flowering tree or a sack of nourishing potatoes, in a little child or a smiling, wrinkled face, in a warmed heart and a transformed life, in the abundance of grace and courage poured out into all our lives day by day by God which makes the ongoing pilgrimage possible.

Did Susanna expect her children John and Charles to do what they did? Did she expect ‘Methodism’ to be born? I wonder – to be honest, I doubt it – even a mother's hopes and expectations might fall short of her children being instruments of change and revolution across the nation (and beyond) and giving birth to something which changed the face of Britain in its day and which now today, in 2019, has 90million adherents worldwide.

No, I rather think both the mothers we have been considering today, despite the expectations they had, were breathless at what God actually did through their sons.

What about us? As we work through our own expectations and our own tensions, are we ready to be blown away? Are we up for a transformation beyond our imagining? The passage from Isaiah 62 spoke in rich terminology of transformation: 'you shall be called by a new name... You shall be a crown of beauty... and a royal diadem... You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married...'

'God beyond our dreams...' we sang earlier... 'in our living and our dying we are bringing you to birth'.

Can we see the touch of God's hand upon our lives, transforming us into something fragrant and sparkling, bringing pleasure to those around us? Or do we feel – or behave - more like a jar of flat, colourless water or – even worse - has our attitude to life become sour, like a bottle of cheap wine gone stale? Would anyone want to take us to a party?

As we finish, one final thought about expectation, tension and transformation (which, in case you have been dozing, have been the three points of this sermon) because it's not all about what goes on within our hearts or within our church walls – Susanna would be turning in the grave we will visit shortly if that's what we made it. We have to look beyond...I wonder what the world outside these walls expects of us, the followers of Jesus, today? Perhaps, because we are called Methodists, they expect us to be rather dull and dreary – kill joys and party poopers...( we know Wesley himself didn't really like the name, which, it has to be said, doesn't capture the warmed heart of our denomination)... so there's a tension there between what we are called to be, what, even, we want to be, and what the rest of society sometimes sees in us... Let's shatter those expectations; let's live life which, even in the darkest hours, and we all have those, has about it a quality of life and richness which is undeniable and transformative.

Our transformation is not just for our own good, but for the good of the world – when we really grasp that, then we are getting close to the spirit of Susanna Wesley and to the Spirit of Jesus Christ. For as we – vessels of ordinary, everyday water – are transformed by Jesus into something indescribably good and attractive – we need to be poured out, not bottled up.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Jill Baker