

The wedding at Cana - 7 days of revelation of Jesus: 7

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[0:00] On the Lord's day. So we've been looking at John's seven days of revelation of Jesus. Now what I'd like to say to you this morning is that this isn't just a miracle, but it's a sign.

In fact, that's actually what the Greek word means. It's often translated miracle, but the word *semeion* in Greek really means a sign. And that makes a difference, because in the scriptures, miracles are generally signs, but certainly not all signs are miracles.

When Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem, that was a sign, but it wasn't particularly a miracle. And it makes a difference how we think about it.

Because if we have a miracle in our heads, we're going to react in one of two ways. Either we'll just say, well, that's amazing. Or if you're a natural skeptic like I am, you'll say, I find that rather hard to believe.

And either way, we'll just leave it at that. And really, neither response is acceptable. Neither what is really required here.

[1:36] If you are a skeptic, yet you find that others are not, we need to investigate further. Who is presenting the evidence? Are they who they claim to be?

Are they trustworthy? Or is it a scam? Perhaps, if you think you're being scammed, the most important question of all is, is there a context in which this makes sense?

That's always a good question to ask. So who reported this event? John may have been there with himself. Certainly, we know his friend Peter was.

So this isn't some vague 19th hand rumor on social media. This is an eyewitness account. To see if it's trustworthy, you need to look closer.

But the really important thing is if we think sign rather than miracle, we'll ask the question, what does it signify? So I thought it might be a useful exercise to spend a little bit of time thinking about signs in general and then use those insights to answer the question of what the meaning of this particular sign.

[2:48] So here's a sign. Actually, one of my favorite signs. You don't know where it is. It's on the A23, just south of that big roundabout where the A27 bypass crosses.

If you're familiar with the Brighton Hove area, you'll know there are several Welcome to Brighton signs. Most of them are just rather boring green jobs.

But this one's a work of art in itself. So let's make a few remarks about signs, about this sign. And as we've already said, a sign has significance.

A sign has significance. That's the nature of a sign. It's there because somebody wants to tell us something. There's something we need to know.

We need to know about. The point of the sign is not the sign itself. We don't think we, you know, think of it says Welcome to Brighton and just go and sit on the verge and think that's all a Brighton is.

[3:55] It points to something greater, something bigger. It directs our attention to something else. This sign tells us that the city of Brighton and Hove are something to say to us.

But if we want to understand what that is, we first need to ask the question of how it got there. And the second thing I'd like to say about a sign is that somebody has to put it there.

It's not something that just springs up naturally like a dandelion. There must be an intention. In fact, part of our understanding of what the sign says depends on knowing who put it there.

Actually, there must be several people involved in this sign. I don't know, obviously. I don't know the detailed history myself. But I guess it must be something like this. Someone at the council decided a welcome sign was needed at this location.

Somebody else, maybe it's the Rotary Club since they've got their logo on the sign as well. Maybe somebody thought, well, we can do better than just that normal green sign. Let's do something better in this place.

[5:13] So, presumably, a graphic artist was recruited in order to produce a design. Then either that artist themselves or someone else was commissioned actually to produce the sign painted under the metal.

And then, of course, some workers had to come and put the thing up. Otherwise, nobody would ever get to see it. There's planning. Planning, activity and purpose and precision as well.

Notice you're not just welcome to Brighton, but to Brighton and Hove. Very important to get that right. Yes. I'll come to the actually in a minute, actually.

What this sign tells us is that the council and the Rotary Club have something to tell us, presumably the public. But we need to think about what it is they have to tell us.

So, the next thing to say about a sign is that it has meaning. And at this point, things start to get a little bit more complicated.

[6:30] What exactly is being communicated here? And actually, I'd suggest to you that this sign actually has meaning on various different levels. First of all, of course, it marks a boundary.

You're leaving rural Sussex and you're entering the city. But if that's all there was to it, then one of those ordinary green signs would have been fine.

There's actually more here that is being said. The city is saying that it values your visit. It's not treating you as an invader or as an undesirable stranger.

The entrance to the city is open. We don't have city gates nowadays, but if we did, it would have been saying the city gate was thrown open. The sign includes, this one includes both the Rotary and the Council logos, if you can see it.

The Rotary Club on the left and the Council logo on the right. Which suggests that at least as far as this welcome is concerned, the business and administration are in harmony.

[7:41] But if that's all that it's saying, why bother with the fancy artwork? There are more subtle messages here.

The pictures of colored beach huts. Brighton is a seaside town. It has echoes of song. I do like to be beside the seaside.

The stripy beach huts are in Hove, actually. The layout matters, doesn't it?

The layout says something to you. It's formal and modern, yet it's colorful. The treatment of the huts indicates that this is a place to relax. Just the sort of style of the thing.

It's trendy and vibrant. And just by being an artwork itself, it reminds us that the city welcomes and is a center for the creative arts. There's a whole lot of meaning crammed into that little sign there.

[8:47] And it tries to say all this to you as you whiz past in your car. Try not to be distracted from your driving. But if that's the general meaning of the sign, then we need to ask the question, what is the meaning for me?

Because in practice, a sign can say different things to different people. First of all, who does this welcome extend to? Is everybody who passes the sign welcome?

Well, I doubt that that's the case, actually. I don't suppose the drug dealers who are maintaining their county lines are welcome. I don't suppose the terrorist who stayed a night at a hotel in Brighton before going to committing a trustee in London, I don't suppose he was welcome.

What about those gangs of young people? Sorry, that's the wrong word, gangs. Let me say groups of young people on a drunken spree. Are they welcome? Well, in that case, it's a bit ambivalent, isn't it?

You have to say yes and no. We want the trade, but we don't necessarily want the wild behavior. The welcome's a bit ambivalent here. You're welcome as long as you join in with the spirit of the city.

[10:08] Or perhaps what the council would like you to think the spirit of the city is, which may not be the same thing. What does the sign mean to me personally?

Well, when I see the sign, it tells me I'm nearly home. It's calming. The stress of the journey is nearly done. There's an old song that says, The sweetest mile is the last mile home. And that reminds me that I'm nearly home. On the other hand, if I was a Harris parent, I had a car full of kids. Are we there yet?

Then the notice comes as a relief, doesn't it? Are we nearly there yet? Yes, we are nearly there. And of course, it means something slightly different to the kids themselves, doesn't it? The holiday has started. The beach is within reach. And the excitement grows. If you're a student or perhaps an artist or artisan seeking a workplace, then it signifies a different kind of boundary, doesn't it?

[11:21] It says, this is the first day of the rest of your life. You come to a place of opportunity. It's not home yet, but it might become so.

If you're one of these people with what's called an alternative lifestyle, maybe you're just seeking a place of acceptance. Maybe you think that the place where you will recognize you in Brighton. Again, if you're an addict or homeless person, the world comes a bit ambivalent again, isn't it? It's just London by the sea.

But perhaps that's a message of hope. Perhaps it's a message that a change of scene will lead to a change in life circumstances and opportunity. In fact, to every single person who sees this sign, the message is slightly different.

History and experience affect our response. It's overlaid with all the nuances of expectation and opportunity. It's colored by the very mood you have when you arrive.

[12:33] It's even colored by the mode of transport you took to get here. Have you been sitting in a traffic jam in a bus for two hours? If you have, then a reaction to the welcome might be slightly different than just someone who's turned up by a veteran car on the November one.

When the message is perhaps, gosh, we made it. But whoever you are, the city has something to say to you. The question is, can you hear it?

so as we turn to the wedding at Cana let's use these observations to guide our approach let's think about these three things that a sign has significance that someone put the sign there that it has a meaning and further it has a meaning for you and me so a sign as we've said has significance it's not just about the Wow factor John told us about this event in verse 11 because there is something important we need to know it's something to do with Jesus glory that he told us about earlier John 1 14 we read the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us we have seen his glory the glory of the one and only who came from the father full of grace and truth so in chapter 2 verse 11 John tells us this is something about this about having seen his glory but if we're thinking about the significance of the sign the first part of it is a bit cryptic isn't it it's a bit puzzling verse 4 when Mary has pointed out the problem Jesus replies dear woman why do you involve me my time has not yet come a fair question you might think neither Jesus nor his disciples were in the catering business wine shortage wasn't his problem but what does did he mean by my time has not yet come the more you think about it slightly more puzzling this seems to become what exactly was he referring to because actually John the Baptist has already announced that he is stepping back we've just been told that the spirit had descended upon Jesus surely the time has come well actually commentators differ as to exactly what Jesus means but I'll give you a suggestion that we can get some clues from the context first thing is to note that it is a way this is a wedding but perhaps what he's saying is it's not time for my wedding for the wedding it's not time for the marriage supper of the lamb this is a banquet but it's not the messianic banquet that the rabbis were expecting perhaps it is a wedding and it is a banquet but it is not the wedding and it is not the banquet maybe that's what Jesus meant but be that as it may certainly we notice in verse 5 that Jesus does not refuse to act he listens to what his mother has requested and takes charge this is a banquet it is a celebration it is a wedding and a wedding is a boundary a send-off it says in Genesis for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh a wedding is both an ending and a beginning an ending of the old way of life and a beginning of the new way of life and whatever is Jesus exactly meaning it is clear that Jesus has reached a boundary a turning point

it's not so much a geographical border although that's involved that's why I read through to verse 15 or Jerome read through to verse 15 because he's got on his way to Jerusalem there's going to be a change of location but even more there's a change of lifestyle a change of life we can pick that up from the words as well I think there's nothing disrespectful about Jesus referring to his mother as woman mete in Greek it is just a normal polite way to address a woman and yet it's not the way you'd normally address your mother is it it's rather formal it seems that both mother and son realise that this is a significant moment like that married couple whose wedding they're celebrating Jesus is about to leave his old life and family behind it's as if Mary is saying do this one thing and there's no going back the battle is joined the game is on perhaps this is Mary's way of letting go she could be thinking well I've cared for your needs for 30 years you didn't join the army you didn't go to university but you're not staying in the carpentry business either you're off can you do this last thing for me before you leave perhaps that's what she was saying perhaps she's asking for a farewell here something that we would do for her before both their lives change forever and that is what happens if you notice in verse 12 a family has a brief sojourn in Capernaum and John specifically makes it clear they didn't stay there long this was just the end of that their previous part of their life and the beginning of the new life and then Jesus leaves for Jerusalem and a confrontation this is the change when things change forever so it is a wedding a turning point a boundary it's not the time but it is a time and the second thing we need to ask is who put this sign here well who put it in the narrative of course is John he's the one who recorded it who set the event in motion it seems to have been Mary

Jesus' mother and what was she expecting I don't think she was expecting a side trip to the wine merchant somehow I think she was expecting a miracle actually we're not clear exactly why she was expecting this but we do remember we are told in the other gospels that Mary treasured these things in her heart from Jesus' birth she perhaps was beginning to understand was now that's all going to come into significance so it seems to be Mary that instigated the thing some commentators have suggested that perhaps Mary was a relative of the bridegroom and involved in some way with the planning she seemed to know that something had gone wrong she seemed to know who the servants were who were doing the and you know felt it was appropriate to address them so maybe she was helping to plan the wedding and it's a bit of a problem for her that something had gone wrong she at least knew there was a problem and who was doing the serving and what does she do she hands in verse 5 she hands the problem over to Jesus well that's always a good strategy and it certainly works for her in this case she just tells the waiters to do what Jesus says now and so it's Mary who starts things off who decides as it were there needs to be a sign but it's Jesus of course with the help of some waiters who actually executes the miracle executes the sign it's his sign really it's Jesus' sign some commentators point out how little ritual is involved in this you would have expected preparation and prayer and words of command you know like in Harry Potter sort of things they say become wine but there's nothing of that at all actually

[22:10] Jesus doesn't even touch the jars there's no preparation there's no prayer the only word of command is to the waiters to do to fill up the jars just water in wine out simple as that Jesus doesn't appeal to the father the power employed is Jesus' own and yet it's surely the father himself who created this opportunity for Jesus' power to be revealed so as in that welcome to Brighton sign there are various answers to that question who put the sign there but it's certainly somebody who wanted to show us Jesus' glory and it was placed there firstly for the disciples as we see in verse 11 but John realised that it needs to be more widely known so he's recorded it for everyone to read so the sign has a meaning the meaning of a sign can be multi-layered

I suppose the most obvious implication is that Jesus endorses marriage and marriage feasts marriages are good because they point they do point forward to the wedding supper of the lamb to the messianic banquet Jesus of course doesn't advocate drunkenness but he has no issue with that psalm that says wine gladdens the heart of man oil to make his face shine and bread that sustains his heart Jesus is not a party pooper this is a joyous occasion and a feast is part of the package we don't want this marriage going off to a bad start actually Jesus seemed to quite like social events we read in Matthew John came neither eating nor drinking and they say he has a demon the son of man came eating and drinking and they say here is a glutton and a drunkard a friend of tax

collectors and sinners but wisdom is proved right by her actions

Jesus wisdom here says that this was a celebration and it shouldn't be allowed to go wrong but still if that was the only meaning it would hardly justify the prominence that John gives to the narrative would it we do need to look deeper than that why a wedding and why wine who said it's not yet time for Jesus' own wedding the marriage supper of the lamb but still the plan is in hand it's that same author John who seemed to have this wedding in mind when he much later when he wrote the book of revelation because he wrote let us rejoice and be glad give him glory for the wedding of the lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready fine linen bright and clean was given her to wear fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints then the angel said to me write blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the lamb and he added these are the true words of god those who had been invited to that wedding were rejoicing and that points us forward to the wedding supper of the lamb but as

John makes clear in revelation the bride here is the church at Jesus wedding there won't be a catering malfunction but that is for the future what the sign what did the sign mean to those who saw it then and for us today and as we've said when we think of wine when we think of a wedding we see it's not just a return to the old but a change a time of change to something new and better John the Baptist has already made this point I would not have known him except the one who sent me to baptize with water told me the man on whom you see the spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit water in wine out John baptize with water

Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit as a general rule of course wine is best aged but not in this case the master of ceremonies says everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink but you have saved the best till now the wine of the old covenant the law of Moses the temple and its rituals were good wine if properly received they did indeed gladden the heart as the psalmist said but it was largely external and so we have this famous passage from Jeremiah the time is coming declares the Lord when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah it will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt because they broke my covenant although I was a husband to them declares the Lord this is the covenant that I will make with the house of

[28:17] Israel after that time declares the Lord I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts and I will be their God and they will be my people then in Acts 2 when Peter and the disciples were accused of being drunk Peter quotes from Joel what did Joel write afterwards I will pour out my spirit on all people your sons and daughters will prophesy your old men will dream dreams and your young men will see visions the wine!

the wine that Jesus brings is better it is the wine that gladdens the heart of men and women just as a glass of wine can refresh our spirit so the Holy Spirit comes as refreshment and what better time to introduce it at a wedding banquet a time of celebration of a new beginning after all a wedding is a covenant isn't it it's the main point of it it's a covenant for a new life to the bride and groom say I'm moving away from my old life I'm putting that behind me we're starting a new life together and so the disciples begin to understand a new start is being made the light is beginning to dawn something glorious is indeed at hand as they said in verse 11 of course they've got a long way to go yet they're far from clear how it will all work out but they've started on the course they've attended the first class if you like this is

Messiah 101 this is the beginning but they're assured that they've enrolled on the right program they're not backing a dead horse flogging a dead horse as we say they're not signed up for the course that's wrong for them they see this sign and they see that yes this is the person we need to listen to this is the way God is moving we're on the right track so for them the old system was beginning to look old it's time to bring in the new what is the meaning for me for you and me today because perhaps for us this message doesn't seem new at all after all this happened if it happened at all 2000 years ago we suffer don't we often from what's been called argument fatigue the perception that an old idea is no longer valid just because it's old and actually even when John wrote these words down many years had passed since the events described and the events had moved on other things had happened there have been further developments but the ancient writer wants to tell his readers that for them and for us it is new the wine is new the message is new

every morning after all Brighton has been a holiday resort 200 years hasn't it yet every time you pass that sign it's a new start you come as it were to the city anew either you're coming home again or you're coming to a new home and as with the welcome to Brighton sign the new wine can have different significance for different people for Mary it was a sign that our old reasonably comfortable life had changed forever now there was to be heartache it was an ending as well as the beginning as a wedding always is what about the master of ceremonies well he saw something remarkable but he didn't really understand it to be fair to him of course he didn't have full information he hadn't been told how it happened so it just seemed like a catering quirk whether the servants later owned up we're not told but it does at least tell us that if we want to understand the sign we need to make sure we've got all the data we've been told everything we need to know because we are told the crucial detail we're told that it's

Jesus who makes the transformation for the disciples it was encouragement as we already said this is the right place and it's a glorious place this is only the beginning when you pass that welcome to Brighton and Hove sign it marks just the start of your day out or your hen party or your week's holiday or your whole new life in a new city perhaps you are like many of us here a long time resident coming home even so it is still good to be reminded of the fact that you are home you haven't somehow landed up in some strange town where you're a stranger and unwelcome what you make of the welcome is really up to you in a sense perhaps it reassures you that you've come to the right place this is the reassurance the disciples needed in verse 11

[34:39] Jesus is in the business of transformation he takes the brackish water of our old lives and is aiming to make it into fine wine will you make a start or if you already made a start don't stop at the welcome sign press on to the city center as the apostle Paul wrote not that I've already obtained all this or I've already been made perfect but I press on to take hold of that which for Christ sorry of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me brothers I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it but one thing I do forgetting what is behind straining towards what is ahead I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which

God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus when you see the sign press on to the center of the city it's been said that it takes a few hours to see the sights of Paris central Paris is not a very big city it takes a few hours to see the sights of the city but it takes a lifetime to know it John is hanging out the welcome sign for us here he's hanging out a welcome to a different city not to Brighton and Hove not to Paris or London but a spiritual city a city called the New Jerusalem which he tells us later on is the city of the great king and which somehow is also the bride of Christ in Jesus time the old Jerusalem was already looking pretty shabby they just built a new temple but what was going on in it was really not good news the days of the old Jerusalem were numbered in that sense at least the city would be destroyed in AD 70 because it's been rebuilt but the days of that temple certainly were numbered Jerusalem was already looking pretty second hand we'll be looking at that in our next study but John will tell us again in his later book that the new city is paved with gold it never goes old John is giving us the tour of the sites you can take the tour in a few hours but to know the city takes eternity so here's the welcome sign welcome not to Brighton and Hove if you're a visitor here we do welcome you to our city of course but this is the welcome sign to New Jerusalem you're invited in thank you