

CHAPTER 3

HOW MUCH CHANGE MIGHT WE EXPERIENCE?

Jesus Introduced to the World as an Extraordinary Being: The Wedding at Cana

And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come. His mother saith unto the servants, Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it. And there were set there six waterpots of stone, after the manner of the purifying of the Jews, containing two or three firkins apiece. Jesus saith unto them, Fill the waterpots with water. And they filled them up to the brim. And he saith unto them, Draw out now, and bear unto the governor of the feast. And they bare it. When the ruler of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and knew not whence it was: (but the servants which drew the water knew;) the governor of the feast called the bridegroom, And saith unto him, Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse: but thou hast kept the good wine until now. (John 2:3-10)

The first event in Jesus' ministry related by John is the story of the water made wine at the wedding feast in Cana.⁴⁴ This miracle of Jesus in Galilee is the first sign that Jesus is indeed an exceptional individual. For many of those who would later be told of his deeds, or hear Jesus themselves, this story from an obscure northern town, far away from Jerusalem, that a man had turned water into wine was a sign of a major prophet. No one had done anything like that before in living memory. As we know, there was more to come.

Initially, Jesus refuses to be involved. God's work is not to be done just at the behest of human desires. For me, this human element makes Jesus real. He, like me, is at first hesitant to accept the prompting. Then, perhaps recognising

the difficult position of the host who has run out of wine for the wedding reception, Jesus is led to help out. In this first miracle, Jesus is merely helping alleviate the situation; he has not yet started on his healing and life-saving ministry. Do we not find this ourselves as we enter the spiritual quest seriously, that our life starts to become easier even before we experience major changes within ourselves?

Jesus is introduced by his mother Mary. Why his mother? In particular, why the mother rather than the typical authority figure of the father? It is his mother as the ultimate giver of life, the bearer, the nurturing figure. His mother introduces and brings forth Jesus into his first miraculous act of ministry.

Moreover, in the ancient texts, Wisdom is always female, the voice of Sophia.⁴⁵ Jesus is the son of Wisdom. In this episode, as John relates the story, it is the female voice of Wisdom, Jesus' mother, who says, "When Jesus asks something of you, do it". Learning to listen to and obey the voice of wisdom is important in the spiritual life. That is, the spiritual journey has a strong element of faithfulness or obedience, right from the start. *Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it* was a necessary instruction at that time, yet it is also on a deeper level a timeless instruction.

The wisdom spoken here is not worldly wisdom gained by practical experience handling matters of business and human affairs. Such wisdom is commonly oriented to resolving situations with the aim of worldly gain. The spiritual voice of wisdom comes from God: *For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding* (Proverbs 2:6). It derives from a deep spiritual understanding in our hearts of what God is asking to be done that leads to peace and righteousness and preserves us from following paths of darkness and 'evil'.⁴⁶

In a telling statement (John 2:9), John notes that the ruler did not know from whom this miraculous drink emanated, though the servants did. The poor perceive what those with wealth and possessions cannot.

John is making it clear that Jesus has the power to turn ordinary water into excellent wine, or the mundane mind into spiritual intoxication. As the governor of the feast observes, in this case the best wine is served later. Such is the

experience of the spiritual journey. The best and sweetest times may not be served up by God early but instead come well into the journey. The amount of wine in this story is considerable. Each stone jar held at least fifteen gallons (sixty to seventy litres), and six jars would have held over 360 litres of wine. In modern terms, some 480 bottles would be a stupendous amount for a small village wedding. This amount of wine signifies the boundless blessings of life in the Spirit.

For those steeped in the Hebrew faith, this episode recalled the stories of Elijah and Elisha. Elijah had encountered the impoverished widow at drought-stricken Zarephath and prophesied that her barrel of meal and cruse of oil would not fail till the rains fell again (1 Kings 17:10–16). Similarly, Elisha had compassion for a woman whose husband had died. She was now at the mercy of his creditors, who planned to sell her two boys as slaves (2 Kings 4:1–7). Elisha told her to collect empty jars and to shut herself indoors. Through her obedience to these instructions, her jars were miraculously filled with oil that she could sell to repay the debts and support her family. This ancient prophet had been able to rescue a poor and marginalised woman from distress, showing compassion and in the process providing a wondrous spiritual sign.⁴⁷ The unbelievable, sustaining flow of oil is paralleled by the vast amount of wine delivered for the wedding feast and later by Jesus feeding the thousands of people by the lake. So John has introduced Jesus as an extraordinary person, a worker of miracles, and placed him in the line of the old prophets. In John 1:38, Jesus is linked back to Moses as a man who dwelt with God, and in John 2:6–9 to the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

The physical changing of water into wine contains a daunting implication, for it suggests that to enter the Presence of God, a correspondingly large change is required inwardly of each of us. Further, it implies that this inward miracle can be accomplished with Jesus' assistance. The guiding rule for this journey is made clear by Jesus' mother as the voice of spiritual wisdom —*whatsoever he saith unto you, do it*. Obedience is required, and the promise is spiritual life. That applies to the leadings and promptings within each of us. In this journey it no longer matters what we each think

should be done; instead, we must be prepared to do whatever the Light (or Jesus) shows us is the way.

I can imagine John making the point strongly to new disciples that this is a new way of living; many of their old rules and habits will need to be left behind if they are to follow the Light and Jesus. William Penn wrote about the first Quakers:

They were changed men [and women] themselves before they went about to change others. Their hearts were rent as well as their garments, and they knew the power and work of God upon them. . . . And as they freely received what they had to say from the Lord, so they freely administered it to others. The bent and stress of their ministry was conversion to God, regeneration and holiness, not schemes of doctrines and verbal creeds or new forms of worship, but a leaving off in religion the superfluous and reducing the ceremonious and formal part, and pressing urgently the substantial, the necessary and profitable part, as all on serious reflection must and do acknowledge.⁴⁸

Clearing Out in Preparation for the Journey

And the Jews' passover was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem And found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting: And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables; And said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise. (John 2:13-16)

The Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread is a Hebrew religious and holiday period, a harvest festival that falls in March–April (see table 1). In John's gospel, Jesus went three times to Jerusalem for the Passover (John 2:13, 6:4, 12:1). The events in chapter 2 are placed at 28 or 29 CE.⁴⁹ It is also possible this event happened more than once.

The Passover remembers the preparation for and the start of the Israelites' journey from Egypt, the great forty-year physical and spiritual journey through the wilderness that is an allegory for our own journey. It commemorates the exodus from Egypt after four hundred years of slavery, after the night when the angel of death passed over the houses of the Hebrews whose doors were marked with sacrificial blood, while in the houses unmarked by blood all the first-born males of the Egyptians died (Exodus 12:1-42).

This ritual killing, visited upon Egyptian babies and their parents, appals me, and although I can see the allegories, the redemptive violence is more than I can understand. However, the Jews of Jesus' time would have understood the significance of the flight from Egypt as the start of the great journey, as emphasised in Exodus 12:2: *This month shall be unto you the beginning of months.*

Table 1. Major Jewish Festivals

(sources: *NIV Study Bible* (2011); Exodus 23:14-17; Leviticus 23:1-44; Deuteronomy 16:16)

Festival	Reference	Time	Description	Purpose
Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread	Exodus 12:1-14 Leviticus 23:5-7	March-April	Eating lamb with bitter herbs, and bread without yeast	Remember deliverance from slavery in Egypt
First Fruits	Leviticus 23:9-14	March-April	Presenting sheaf of first barley	Joy and thankfulness for God's bounty
Weeks (Harvest)/ Pentecost	Leviticus 23:15-22 Deuteronomy 16:9-12	May-June	Joyous festival with offerings, including first wheat harvest	Joy and gratitude for blessings of the harvest
Ingathering (Tabernacles)	Exodus 23:14-17 Leviticus 23:33-36 Deuteronomy 16:13-15	Sept.-Oct.	Celebration of the harvest, living in booths, libations of water	Remember journey from Egypt, honour the productivity of Canaan

What does Jesus do in his first public act recorded by John? He walks in, secure in his own authority to do so, and, taking a corded whip, drives the animals from the temple, sets free the doves, and overturns the money changers' tables. There

must have been shock and pandemonium in the temple courtyard, with merchants outraged and customers scattering. Were people affronted at this interruption to their duties or even ashamed that they too were about to be sucked into the falseness of the monetary charade? Priests and temple guards came running. “Who is doing this?” For many, such an act would invite severe punishment. But Jesus stands with the courage to confront them all, sure in his authority, saying, “Get this stuff out of here, it has no place in the temple”. And no one was able to argue honestly that he was wrong.

This episode of Jesus clearing the temple forecourt is placed in the Synoptic Gospels on the day after Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, after Palm Sunday and just a week before his death. John places it earlier, as the first of Jesus’ many acts to confront the falseness of the religious teachings and practices of his time. By this act, he challenged the profit motives of the temple community.⁵⁰ The selling of animals for ritual slaughter, the potential dishonesty and the money-grubbing of the money changers, all happened with the knowledge of the priests and Jewish hierarchy, and the profits were shared.⁵¹ Jesus challenges this. Let us ponder the courage and impact of this episode.

First, Jesus has driven the means of ritual slaughter from the temple. He is placing an end to a practice that had been a hallmark of ancient Hebrew culture and was exemplified by sacrifices of young animals and horrifying examples such as Abraham’s willingness to kill his own son, the slaughter of the Egyptian children at the first Passover, and the slaughter of the priests of Baal at the behest of Elijah. Although ritual slaughter did not finally stop till the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, my sense is that Jesus knew that all such rituals were unnecessary and that this ritual slaughter was certainly unwarranted. Jesus also confirmed with a Jewish teacher that the fundamental commandments to love God and love each other were far more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices (Mark 12:32–34).

The early Christians noted that the endless practice of such animal sacrifices was ineffective in bringing people to perfection (Hebrews 10:1–11). Rabbinic Jews might have continued the practice, but the followers of Jesus did not.

The Letter to the Hebrews (chapters 7–9) enunciates a primary teaching of these early Christians—that Jesus is a priest in the line of Melchizedek, not in the line of Levi. Melchizedek was the high priest of the Most High God who brought forth bread and wine for Abraham and predated the appointment by Moses of the tribe of Levitical priests.⁵² The old covenant based on Mosaic laws and regulations is to be replaced by a new covenant. Further, Jesus, by his own sacrifice, forever ended the external Mosaic rituals of handwashing and animal sacrifice and replaced them with a discipline of obedience to the inward Light.⁵³

Second, Jesus is placing an end to financial gain and corruption through the temple system. The temple, scribes, and priests were central to Jewish life. The religious leaders and Sanhedrin were hereditary positions that were drawn from the wealthy landowners of the Sanhedrin class, entrenched in a fruitful relationship with the Romans. The temple was the place to demonstrate adherence to social and religious customs. This priestly leadership was the arbiter of the law, one that could on the one hand confer social status and on the other ensure a person was stoned to death.

The Passover, one of the great festivals, was a time for committed Jews to travel to the great temple in Jerusalem and to immerse themselves together in their faith. There would have been crowds of people. This would also have been a time of great profitability, with much money changing hands and much effort to demonstrate status and to attain religious approval. The parallel is obvious to our own consumer-dominated Christmas period, most of which revolves around retail trade profitability and gimmickry that distorts our Christian spiritual heritage.

The Passover also celebrates the deliverance of the people by God from Egypt, from bondage into spiritual freedom. Jesus is making it very clear that the temple is not a place for gathering material wealth. Is that not the case with all of us, that our spiritual journey starts seriously when we confront our own material desires? In fact, there is little progress till we do. We may not be ready to sell all we have and give to the poor. Yet, are we earning honestly and spending wisely or are we greedy or buying unnecessary possessions?

Jesus answered those who sought a sign confirming his authority to drive the traders from the temple. Both Jesus' reply and John's commentary are recorded in the gospel:

Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? But he spake of the temple of his body. When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said. (John 2:19-22)

By including these words early in the gospel, John is drawing attention to the traditionally sacred period of three days (e.g., Exodus 3:18, 5:3, 8:27). This time frame recalls examples from Hebrew history, such as the days of darkness imposed on Egypt when the Pharaoh refused to release the Hebrews from bondage (Exodus 10:22), a significant fast (Esther 4:16), and the time Jonah was in the whale's belly (Jonah 1:17).

John is extending the meaning of Jesus' clearing of the built temple to recognising that God dwells within an inner temple, one that is inside each of us. Jesus asserts the built temple is not the important place to interact with God. The important place, the most sacred place, the most ready place, is within our own hearts. We need to be in contact with God everywhere our body goes, not just in the church or temple. It is easy to gloss over this teaching of Jesus, which became fundamental in the religious life in the early church.

This early Christian teaching is evident in the final sermon of Stephen before his stoning to death: *Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet (Acts 7:48).*⁵⁴ Paul must have heard these words, as he was a witness to Stephen's death, though the mystery was not finally instilled in him until after his conversion, for it was later that Paul wrote *Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? (1 Corinthians 3:16) and for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (2 Corinthians 6:16).* Paul is recalling the words of Jeremiah (31:33) that God

would develop a new covenant with the people, a covenant written in their hearts and not just on the tablets of stone handed down by Moses. Paul reiterates the message in a letter to his spiritual son Timothy: *That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us* (2 Timothy 1:14).

The real temple is not the building of stone, for each of us is the temple of God, and it is from within ourselves that we need to overcome worldly desires for wealth and status, and it is from within each of us that these materialistic profiteers are to be banished. As George Fox wrote in 1652:

There I declared the everlasting Truth of the Lord and the word of life for several hours, and that the Lord Christ Jesus was come to teach his people himself and bring them off all the world's ways and teachers to Christ, their way to God; and I laid open all their teachers and set up the true teacher, Christ Jesus; and how they were judged by the prophets, Christ, and the apostles; and to bring them off the temples made with hands, that they themselves might know they were the temples of God.⁵⁵

The challenge of a new way of living is clear to anyone familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures. John is linking Jesus to the ancient Hebrew succession of divinely inspired, prophetic work. To drive that point home, John comments in the last verse of this second chapter that Jesus *needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man* (2:25). These are both the words of someone who had seen Jesus in action and also a clear statement that Jesus had the inward authority of divine understanding to know the inmost parts of those around him.

Jesus calls us to let go of possessions and habits no longer useful. The social norm of going to church, although important in building community, is no longer the benchmark of performance in the faith. Jesus calls us to personal transformation into the living Christ. We are not required to measure up to how others in the church rate us but to face God inwardly, where there is no hiding from rigorous examination by the Light within.

As Thomas Merton puts it:

The real building of the Church is a union of hearts in love, sacrifice, and self-transcendence. The strength of this building depends on the extent to which the Holy Spirit gains possession of each person's heart, not on the extent to which our exterior conduct is organised and disciplined by an expedient system.⁵⁶