

When I arrived at Wimbledon, nearly nine years ago, the wardens laid on the most marvellous party after the induction service. The wine flowed freely, and I began to realise that wine would be an integral part of ministry here at St Mary's.

So when I looked up the readings for this morning's service, it seemed most fitting that it should be the wedding at Cana.

This is a bible story that I have preached about at countless weddings and other services, usually emphasising the extraordinary generosity of God – like mole in the Wind in the Willows, one wants to cry out 'too much, too much'. Even at St Mary's, and even with the choir here, 180 gallons of wine would go a long way.

But today I want to focus on a different aspect of the story. Not even Rectors are expected to turn water into wine. Jesus is the only one who can do that. We are all of us, however, expected to provide the water.

When guests were invited for a meal or a celebration, it was customary for water to be provided for the ritual washing of hands. Water was also supplied for the washing of feet, and for the cleansing of eating utensils. The provision of ample supplies of water was the mark of hospitality.

At this wedding there were six jars – an enormous capacity as would be required for a large gathering. The jars were already partly empty when Jesus was asked by his mother to sort out this domestic problem, so had obviously already been used as the guests had arrived. It was the servants' job to ensure that they were full at the start of the celebration and now, at Jesus's instruction, they were sent to refill them.

And that is our responsibility.

We have to provide the basic tools for welcome.

In every church, people take many and varied roles. We have wardens, we have a Parish Office, we have servers, and sidesmen, cleaners, flower arrangers, bell ringers, singers, and many more 'official' roles.

And then there are the worshippers, including those dragged along by their parents, those looking for something more in life, those who are grieving and find church in some way comforting, those hoping for a school place for their child, those coming to hear their marriage Banns being read, and those who are confused guests at a baptism.

Despite, no because of, this huge variety of roles and reasons for being here, those of us who come regularly, who say we belong here, say that this is “our church”, have a shared responsibility. We need to provide the welcome, the basic tools for celebration. Jesus provides the bread and wine of communion. Grace, that mysterious miraculous transformation that brings joy and strength, flows from him, but for this to have any meaning we need to fill the jars with water.

As at a wedding feast there are many preparations, so too in church.

Someone has to set up the altar, ensure that wafers and wine are there to be consecrated. Flowers have to be ordered and collected before they can be arranged. Music has to be rehearsed. Orders of service printed. The notice sheet and website have to be up to date so that people know what is happening. There are many, many essential tasks that have to be done in advance if church is to work. And on the day itself, we need the people to steward, to light candles and to welcome.

Then finally the service starts, but it is still not worship unless there are people praying, turning to Christ, acknowledging that we are his servants and everything we do in church depends upon him.

What you will note is that none of this depends upon the presence of a priest. Yes, we need a priest to represent Christ at the Eucharist, when plain bread and wine are turned into the holy symbols of Christ’s body and blood, but we don’t need a priest for the other tasks. Certainly the Rector and curate and all other ministers do lots of other things -- visiting people, taking communion to the sick, preaching, teaching, and lots of behind the scenes organisation, but in reality nearly all those things can be done by others.

The miracle at Cana is often said to point to the Eucharist. The Jewish rules of purification being replaced by the joy of new wine and celebration.

However, the joy of celebration within worship is not totally dependent upon communion. In the Church of England, until the 1950's and the "parish communion" movement, people rarely took communion except on Holy days. It was all Matins and Evensong then.

But the worship itself and the community, the family, of the church provided the celebration. This was the wine. The church was and is the body and the blood of Christ. This is what the grace of Christ could and can do. And like the wine provided for the wedding, there is more than can simply be drunk by the guests, it is for the wider community.

In 1907, the people of this church in were responsible for setting up the Wimbledon Guild. The worship had transformed them, made them socially aware, and given them the strength to act. In an act of faith, they set up this extraordinary organisation that now provides counselling services, advice, and more. It has over 250 volunteers.

More recently faith groups have worked to establish Faith in Action and even more recently, the Night Shelter. The welcome is not simply to those who come here to this building, but to all people. But none of this can happen if we do not provide the raw material.

We have to provide the water that Jesus can turn into wine.

As I move on to retirement, something I am finding very hard to imagine, I must admit I am struggling to let go. I keep worrying, 'will everything continue smoothly?' Then today I look at all the people here and know that it will be OK, probably better than OK. For you will make sure that the stone jars are filled with water. There will be welcome, everything needed for worship and celebration will be provided. And when worship happens, when people come together in love and humility to serve Christ, then that water is turned into wine. So I know that you will look out for those who are lonely, those who need a visit. You will ensure that there is support for those who need it, you will be praying for your new Rector, you will be building community.

So it is in confidence that I pray for God's blessing upon this Church and the wonderful people who make up this congregation, and I pray that you will find a new Rector who is a person of joy and compassion who will provide even more stone jars of water that can be turned into wine.

May God bless you. Amen.