



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life.

Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Think of a time when you have experienced an unexpected blessing in your life. What happened, and how did it make you feel?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Praise be to you, God our Father and Mother!
You set the heavens in their places,
and fashioned the earth from the dust.
When the time was right,
you made human beings in your image and likeness,
creatures made for prayer and for praise.

Praise be to you, O God!

Praise be to you, Lord Jesus Christ!

All there is was made through and for you,
yet for our sake you humbled yourself and became flesh.
In your living and teaching, healing and change-making,
you pointed to the love revealed most fully on the cross,
and held a broken world in your embrace.

Praise be to you, O Christ!

Praise be to you, Holy Spirit of God!

You hovered over the waters of creation,
and breathed your life into our hearts.
Your wind sweeps us off our feet,
your flames fire our imaginations,
your still small voice calls us home.

Praise be to you, O Spirit! Amen

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 36:5 – 10

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.

**Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
your judgements are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.**

How precious is your steadfast love, O God!

All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

**They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.**

For with you is the fountain of life;

in your light we see light.

**O continue your steadfast love to those who know you,
and your salvation to the upright of heart!**

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.

Amen

Prayers of Renewal

God of abundance and overflowing love,
we've come knowing there's much in our lives
and in the life of the world
in need of your renewal and restoration,
which we bring to you now in prayer:

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the times we've failed to love one another:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the injustices and oppression in our world:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the failings and disunity of your Church:
Restore us and heal us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of transformation and hope,
you set us free from the past, to flourish in the future.
Thank you that you forgive, restore and call us on.
Amen

Reading John 2:1 – 11

Sermon

My first introduction to the unique account we have of Jesus turning water into wine was *not* within the pages of John's Gospel, but in a

comedy sketch performed by Rowan Atkinson. He casts it as magic, appreciated by the servants and crowds alike, who demanded more such tricks. It reflects a common misunderstanding of what it means to make sense of Jesus through the lens of the seven signs pointing to his status as the Word made flesh, as fully human and fully divine.

The story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee is a challenging reading to preach on partly because of this baggage, but also simply as it is among the most famous episodes in the New Testament, and many sermons have explored how the sheer abundance of one-hundred-and-twenty gallons of top-notch wine reflects the overflowing grace and generosity of God. However, I suspect that fewer have explored what we might learn from this story about being *good guests*, willing to share the richness of our faith appropriately within other people's territory and being ready to embrace and be transformed by the gifts that others bring, even when these are challenging or unsettling.

We pick up the action shortly after Jesus had called his first handful of disciples, including Nathaniel of Cana in Galilee. His mother Mary had been invited to a wedding party there, along with Jesus and the friends he had gathered round him. In those days, it was customary for the celebrations to last for a whole week, with the highest quality produce served earlier on, and the cheaper stuff dished out later on, as the guests became more tired and less particular. On the third of the seven days, and no doubt with one eye already looking to Easter and the resurrection account, we are told that Mary called upon her Son to deal with what would have been a serious problem given the lack of clean drinking water, the warm climate and the sheer volume of guests present – the wine had run out. For the unfortunate couple and their families, this would've been seen as a failure of hospitality, and brought with it a significant degree of shame. Presumably, they were close enough to Mary to trust her with this information knowing that she would respond sympathetically and discretely, and indeed, she quietly approached Jesus in the presence of only the servants.

Jesus's reaction to his mother is somewhat enigmatic (2:4), with the result that biblical scholars are divided about whether he was being rude to her, or sarcastic in the face of inadequate wedding planning! Either way, it seems he was reluctant to act because the timing was not yet right and the hour of his glorification on the cross was still to come. For her part, Mary wasn't deterred by this and thus instructed the servants to do whatever Jesus told them (2:5). Those six twenty-gallon containers were there to provide water for Jewish purification rites, and it is important to note that, in converting that water into the finest wine, Jesus was not symbolically discarding his own heritage. He was revealing something new, and sumptuous, overflowing from the existing riches of Judaism (2:6–10), just as he himself embodied divine love overflowing from that graceful dance at the heart of God. The symbolism of this points towards the restoration of Israel longed for by the Hebrew Prophets (cf. Joel 3:13, Amos 9:11–15), fulfilment of the covenant pictured as a marriage in Hosea 2:14–23 and God's invitation to all the nations to enjoy the finest foods and wine without price, in Isaiah 55:1–11. It also invites us to consider two aspects of what it means to be a good guest, in the light of the abundant gift of best wine, and the need to receive the gifts of others.

It's not unusual for churches exploring mission planning to focus on what it means to offer hospitality and welcome, especially with often substantial properties at our disposal. However, what if we turned it around and centred our thinking on what it means to be *good guests* when invited onto the territory of others? The principal guest invited to the wedding at Cana appears to have been Mary, with Jesus and his disciples present essentially because she was. This might serve to explain his reaction when asked to resolve the wine shortage, as this was not his wedding party and he was a degree or two removed from the couple. However, he was nonetheless willing to share with them the riches of his calling and divine status, in the process giving his disciples further reason to trust in him (2:11). In that sense, if not

others, Jesus modelled being a good guest. What might it mean for us to be good guests too in the settings in which we find ourselves, I wonder? Moreover, despite the initial surprise of the chief steward, the gift that Jesus brought was recognised and embraced (2:9–10). What would it look like for the Church to be better at doing the same, even when the gifts presented to us are challenging or difficult?

At its heart, the story of Jesus turning water into high quality wine is no magic trick, but is a model of being a generous guest sharing the abundance of what they have freely with others, even strangers and those whose own resources had failed. It provides a template for us as guests in an increasingly secular world, and an example of what it means to receive well. May we take both on board, as we examine our mission priorities in the coming months. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Stephen Varney's 2015 commentary, *Water into Wine*, is a powerful exploration of various scenes in John's Gospel and the impacts they have made on the author's life.

Prayers of Intercession

God of all goodness and mercy,
who shows us what it means to love one another,
we bring our prayers for others to you.
God of abundance, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those places and people beset by conflict,
especially those in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen and Myanmar.
God of abundance, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all who have been recently bereaved,
and all those who are unwell in mind, body or spirit.
God of abundance, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all who have lost livelihoods and businesses,
and all who are struggling to keep a roof over their heads.
God of abundance, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all who work in our emergency services,
in the NHS and in social care, as winter pressures grow.
God of abundance, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all who struggle with temptation or addiction,
and for all who are isolated, lonely, or despairing.
God of abundance, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the Church throughout the world,
that we would be open to interruptions and new insights.
God of abundance, **hear our prayer.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...

Lord's Prayer

Blessing

God of all our journeys,
as we go forward into the rest of the week,
may you be the light to our path and the breath we breathe,
and may the blessing of the Father, the Son and the Spirit
be with us and those whom we love and pray for,
now and forevermore.

Amen