

Last Wednesday saw one of the most fascinating inaugurations that America could have imagined. A new start is always interesting, and I wonder if you can remember your own first steps in a new career or a new direction in your life, albeit not quite on a par with becoming President of the United States.

Think back for a moment. I can certainly remember my excitement, walking down the street in Reigate, many years ago, on my first day to work. Or what about a wedding day? For those of you who are married, do you remember what you felt like waking up that morning? **Perhaps you had to give a speech.**

The point is that, when we start a new venture, we usually put a special effort into how we start. So, what do you think would have been the best way for Jesus to signal the start of his ministry? Perhaps the feeding of the 5000 would have made a good point, as well as having plenty of publicity, or what about the raising of Lazarus? Or perhaps it would have been better if Jesus had walked on water in front of a much bigger crowd than just a few disciples. After all, he wanted to bring all the world to his heavenly Father, "to draw all men to him".

But wait a minute. Do you remember how Satan tempted Jesus after his 40 days of fasting in the wilderness before he began his ministry? One of the temptations was to leap dramatically from the highest pinnacle on the Temple in Jerusalem in front of huge, admiring crowds, who would then see the fulfilment of the promise that God would not allow him to "dash his foot against a stone", much less be dashed to pulp by the fall! And Jesus' response to that was "Get thee behind me, Satan!" It is not his will to force our admiration and belief in him.

His actions spring from his love for us and his compassion, not from self-aggrandisement. Think, for example, of his raising Jairus' daughter. That would have been yet another opportunity to let people know he was the promised Messiah come into the world. Yet he tells people to keep it quiet and you will notice that, time and time again, after healing the blind or those suffering from leprosy, he tells them to keep it quiet. It is they who can't keep their joy to themselves, and who spread the good news, not Jesus himself.

So it is the same with this, his first public miracle (although it strikes me that his mother, Mary, may have known of some private ones – small kindnesses that no-one else knew about, in order to come to him about the problem of the wine shortage at the wedding. In spite of her asking, Jesus' initial response is "My time has not yet come", and in spite of his seeming reluctance to get involved, Mary's response is to say to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you". So Jesus didn't intend this to be a first, dramatic, public miracle....and Mary knew he wouldn't be able to ignore someone who needed help.

I wonder if Jesus did have something else in mind for the start of his ministry. We'll never know. But the driving force for him was people's need. And his response was love.

When David and I first met, we went on holiday to Israel, and one day, we just happened to be walking through the village of Cana, when a large procession came down the street, headed by a young man on horseback. Yes, would you believe it, it was actually a village wedding and the young man was the bridegroom. Everyone was clustering around him, pinning money to his clothes, as this was the way they gave wedding gifts. We were noticed as strangers in the village and hustled to the front, and although they were grateful for our money, what they really wanted was that we should come to the wedding feast. Being British, we demurred, but no, Middle Eastern hospitality meant that they wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. It is something we don't understand in the west, but hospitality there is almost a sacred trust, so much so that poor families will go without food to set it before a guest. So there we were, sitting in a courtyard in the open air with mounds of rice and meat before us at a real wedding in Cana of Galilee, much the same as Jesus and his disciples had been. I was the only woman there (you will notice that Mary

was helping with the preparations behind the scenes, which was how she knew they had almost run out of wine), because a Jewish wedding was a week of celebrations for the men, leading up to the final day, when the bride to be was brought out to join them. And after that, a newly married couple did not go away for a honeymoon, but stayed at home and kept open house for a week with further celebrations.

In a life where there was much poverty and hard work, this week of joy and festivity was one of the supreme occasions, and for a Jewish feast, wine was essential. “Without wine,” said the Rabbis, “there is no joy”.

At any time, failing to provide enough would have been a failure in the sacred duty of hospitality, but for the provisions to fail at a wedding would be a terrible humiliation for the bride and bridegroom and their families. They would be remembered all their lives as the couple who were ungenerous and didn't provide enough for their guests.

Well, that's not quite life and death, you may be thinking, even if you take into account the far more serious emphasis they placed on hospitality than we do. It's certainly not on a par with healing the blind and the lepers and raising the dead.

So isn't it even more wonderful that Jesus' love for people wouldn't let him hold back for a much lesser need. Remember that when you wonder whether to bother him with your prayers.

And one other thing to note – his generosity. My sister as a child loved the verse in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm “my cup runneth over” – God fills it so full that it overflows. And here Jesus provides so much wine – they would hardly need 20 to 30 gallons – times 6 ! There were 6 jars of water. Not only that, but it was of the very best quality. I loved the human touch in this story – that the bridegroom is asked why he has saved the best wine until the end, instead of saving a bit of money by bringing out the cheap plonk once people had drunk too much to notice the difference. Jesus has turned water into the very best wine – what a lovely wedding gift !

Yet here, as in his other miracles, he keeps quiet about it and only the servants and his disciples know. His motive was simply love.

As he cared for the bride and groom, so he cares for you.