

The Marriage at Cana – 3rd Sunday of Epiphany (John 2, 1-11) 21.1.18

I've never been to a wedding reception where the wine ran out. In these Majestic days of sale-or-return, that's one anxiety removed. But in a small place in first-century Palestine, where everyone knew everyone, it would have been a disaster, a humiliating failure on this their big day.

Jesus and his mother had been invited, together with his disciples, who'd only joined him in the last few days: it's the very beginning of his ministry. But why do we get *this* story, when we're in the season of Epiphany – the revelation of Jesus as Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God? That revelation had come years before, to the stargazing Magi; then to John the baptizer, sharing the vision of the Spirit-dove alighting on Jesus; then to the first disciples responding to his call; and now through this rather surprising miracle. Generally, Jesus's miracles would be either a compassionate response to some great need – paralysis, blindness – or they'll be meaningful *signs* (sometimes both). At the end of this account there's an editorial comment: 'Jesus did this ... *the first of his signs...*' So whatever is it signing – this sudden abundance of top quality wine?

At first he's reluctant to get involved in this mundane problem: 'My hour has not yet come'. But then he changes his mind, perhaps moved by the plight of the bridegroom and his family, perhaps by his mother showing her trust by telling the servants to do whatever he tells them; but she'd scarcely dream of what would happen.

[By the way, many people find in John's gospel the boundary between actual reporting and a parable-story can sometimes get a bit hazy. But this incident has such very human, down-to-earth touches that it invites us to set skepticism aside, to get into the story in order to uncover the *meaning*.]

Clearly, the main emphasis is on the contrast between water and wine. The water in those big, ceremonial stone jars was for Jewish purification rites. For an *outward* sign of cleansing; and stored in *stone jars* – reminder of the Commandments set in stone maybe? Wine, already a powerful symbol in Judaism, especially at Passover, is poured out to be drunk, to be taken *inside* each person, to enhance their sense of being alive, to give them joy. Not just to be outwardly cleansed, but to be inwardly changed. And that transformation is very much part of the change that's emphasized in John's Gospel – from the Judaism of 'law' to the new faith of 'Spirit', from external observance of rules, to being made new in oneself. Not that the old way is de-valued: the water of the Jewish rite is the starting point: like the Law, it is not rejected but its true purpose fulfilled.

So the contrast is between a religion of *hundreds* of rules to govern every aspect and event of life, with a fixation on what is 'clean' or 'unclean', who is Jewish or not-Jewish; between that and a religion where rules are needed for basic learning between right and wrong, but then the actual living out of them is guided not by the letter of the law (life is too complicated for rules to cover everything) but by the spirit of love shown us and brought to us by Jesus. And brought for everyone, not just for Jewish people.

We are told that in this sign at the wedding feast (itself a biblical symbol of nothing less than the Kingdom of God!) Jesus 'revealed his glory', and through it 'his disciples believed in him'. In general, Jesus was wary of those whose belief was simply based on seeing wonders, those who came and asked to be shown a miracle, as though it were a kind of magic show. So clearly he must have felt that the disciples saw something more significant than just the unexpected chance for a really good booze-up. Somehow sensing a suggestion of divine glory, they believed in him.

What the disciples could not have understood at this point, was something readers of the Gospel would have grasped. It was a connection that foreshadowed things to come. The connection between wine poured out for them to take into themselves, with the wine of Eucharist – and that itself is the effective sign of the blood of Jesus poured out on the cross so that we might take into ourselves something of his life, his essence. This is a radical change, a totally new way of knowing the presence of God. This humble village wedding is a watershed moment, a sign that the Kingdom of God is indeed 'at hand'. It's an *eschatological* moment.

Now don't be alarmed at that word – this is not about the end of the world and Armageddon; it's about the 'end' in the sense of aim and purpose. It's about going beyond the old order into a new kind of world in which we are invited to live our lives in the light of our End – not just of our death, but our 'destination' in the sense of fulfillment, finding the true purpose of our life. Of course this is not accomplished at a stroke; it's an ongoing journey in which we have many setbacks. Yet we can always find encouragement and strength in what Jesus shows us of the nature of God: that God is forgiving; and wills what is very best for us, and always loves us.

Just the other day I heard of a Muslim man who'd converted to Christianity – he'd been to a church service with a friend, and heard about God's love for us. He said he'd been learning the Holy Q'uran and going to mosque all his life, but had never heard that God loves us. He was bowled over. Familiarity can breed – well, not contempt, but certainly a taking-for-granted, a hardly noticed assumption – like the love of one's spouse. Oops! That way danger lies...

Down to earth encouragement for us also comes from those servants at Cana. They would hardly have understood all this, yet simply by doing as Jesus told them, they unwittingly became agents, active participants, in that miraculous change, in that deeply meaningful sign of God's self-giving love .

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