

# Sunday 17 January: Second Sunday of Epiphany

## The Wedding at Cana

**Readings: 1 Corinthians 12.1-11; John 2.1-11**

We have just heard the story of the Wedding at Cana, taken from the second chapter of John's Gospel. John's Gospel alone begins Jesus' public ministry at this wedding. It is obvious that this Gospel has been put together by a writer who is a brilliant literary craftsman. He will use a series of intimate dramatic encounters which have a relevance far beyond the event described. These will not be frozen static symbols; instead he draws the listener into a dramatic arena in which actions as well as words speak to us. In short, in the Gospel in which the Word becomes flesh, it will speak to us through the flesh, through all the five senses. This is the Gospel in which we will see Jesus hungry and thirsty, weeping, touching the eyes of the blind man with the spit of his mouth and the soil of the ground; confronting the crowd who want to stone the woman taken in adultery. He will kneel down and write with his finger in the dust. His feet will be anointed with costly fragrant oil and Mary will dry them with her hair. Jesus himself will wash his disciples' feet. We will see a sword piercing his body and blood and water flowing from his side, and later Thomas will be asked to place his hands in those wounds. This is a Gospel which invites us to see, touch and taste the presence of God in the midst of the suffering of our world. The divine will be made present down here in the sweat and dust of real lives. Let us consider again the wedding at Cana, as St. Augustine invites us, contemplating each word and asking 'Why? Why? Why?'

First, this is a miracle which seems so different from the other miracles which Christ performs. In nearly every other place Jesus' miracles are responses to situations which threaten life or health. He reaches out to the marginalised, lost and forgotten, to bring healing, whereas at this wedding his miracle seems more like magic than healing. Jesus, by turning water into wine, seems to be doing the very kind of thing which in Matthew and Luke's Gospels he refuses to do, when he is tempted by the devil to turn stones into bread. And not only does his miracle seem gratuitous, but in a different cultural context, irresponsible. Even within the liberal West at the moment we are being bombarded on television by warnings of the extreme dangers of alcohol. In many of the cultures I have worked in, alcohol is seen as a real evil, causing social and domestic breakdown including domestic violence, and leading to frightening levels of alcoholism. In our miracle at Cana, Jesus produces not just enough wine to suffice but literally gallons and gallons of the stuff; enough wine to drown in. Why? What is this miracle saying both then and now and how can a miracle of this nature, at which any scientist would scoff, speak to our present needs?

Let us now look more carefully: "On the third day there was a wedding in Cana". Notice the third day. Something else is going to happen on the third day later in this Gospel to bring new life of which this wedding is an early prelude. This Gospel is operating on two levels at once. The author shows us the actual contextualised event within history but at the same time we are invited to contemplate the full picture: the actions of Christ in relation to all of time and all of creation. A literalistic interpretation would limit and confine the power of this drama, just as it would limit music, art or poetry to offer didactic explanation. We are invited in this drama to taste a greater truth.

This wedding is like the overture to the action of this Gospel, in which John introduces the themes of this drama. Centre stage at any wedding is the bride and the bridegroom, the chief steward and the guests, but John draws our attention to the events taking place off centre, where Mary is pleading with her son. The wine at the wedding has run out: "They have no

wine”, she tells her son. The son seems reticent, unwilling to get involved, even rude to his mother. We glimpse a real relationship; a mother eager to push her son forward to promote his gifts, the son hanging back, uncooperative, embarrassed by his mother’s desire to intervene. “Woman, that’s not our concern. It’s none of our business.” His time has not yet come. But the wine running out does matter. Wine is not just a drink. It is a sign and sacrament. It has a meaning and a significance far beyond itself. In Jewish tradition it has a rich symbolism. It is the wine of the Passover: a symbol of a liberation from slavery and death, a symbol of the blood smeared on the door post which became a sign that they would not die but had been chosen by God. It was thus a sign of covenant, a relationship between God and his people, like a marriage covenant, which should never be broken. Even in our own context, imagine the anxiety of a wedding ceremony which goes horribly wrong: where the ring is lost, where the bride does not turn up, where someone in the congregation does call out a reason why two people may not be joined together in holy matrimony, or where the reception is a disaster, the hall double-booked, a reception without wine. It is, for any couple planning to be married, the worst nightmare. Why? Because it seems to speak beyond the event. At the very moment when action is sacrament, a sign of commitment and love, it would be public shaming. The wine running out is a sign of the failure of the relationship with God and one another.

It is now that Mary intercedes. She will not take her son’s reticence for an answer. “Do whatever he tells you to do,” she says to the servants, and to all of us who will ever hear this story. This is the prayer of Mary. Notice it is not the wedding guests or even the hosts who see what is taking place, it is the servants behind the scene who see and participate. While today’s paparazzi would be searching for the public failure, how often they miss the silent miracle taking place off stage. There are six stone water jars: again symbolic, used for ritual purification. Yet six is the symbolic number of incompleteness and they are empty. Now at Jesus’ bidding the jars are filled with water to the very brim. This is a symbol of God’s abundant generosity. The gifts of God again and again can refill all that is empty and used up.

And now the unseen miracle takes place as the servants bring new wine to the wedding guests. The host and guests are unaware of where the new wine has come from and yet they all taste and experience. It is the very best wine which has been saved until last. It is as though John’s Gospel is inviting us to taste that wine too. It is the most delicious communion of all.

What does it mean for us? It is the wine which takes away the shame. It is the wine which reveals God’s abundant gift of life for us even when we least expected to find it. It is the wine which will also speak to us of the pain of love and Christ’s own blood poured out for us. At the very place of loss and shame, it is the wine which points to the resurrection and life which Christ can bring. It is the wine we are called at this Eucharist to taste today – it is the wine of a new kingdom.

I write these words at a time when it sometimes seems our own faith has, or can, run dry, where both church and religion can often feel like those stone water jars: huge stone monuments to a relationship that many believe is empty or meaningless. Worse still, they can become symbols of shame, because we have so often failed to live the covenant we claim to profess. I write this in a week where the terrible suffering of the poor has been visibly held before our eyes in the overwhelming cry of the people of Haiti. Four cyclones, flooding, conflict, a failed government, and now this horrific earthquake. How are we to believe in the covenant of God’s love when human suffering, which no human being should ever have to suffer, screams out at us? None of us can answer that. Yet it is at the moment of complete abandonment that a new covenant must begin. That truth does not take away the pain but it is

written in the struggle and suffering of so many. It is a new covenant, a covenant of love, revealed in blood: a covenant which says 'I will turn your wars on terror into mercy. I will transform your defensiveness into offering. I will change fear into compassion, your greed into a hunger for justice and radical generosity. I will open the eyes of the blind. Your soldiers' weapons can become ploughshares and pruning forks, hands searching for your neighbour in the rubble. Your machines of war can be used to bring healing. You will no longer despise, but search for your brothers and sisters who are lost, and they will help you to find yourself. A new heart I will give you. I will take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will pour out my spirit upon you.'

We can only respond to such desolation and human suffering through a new covenant, a new relationship with God and one another. Clare Herbert in our newsletter today expresses what I believe this covenant to be. She writes:

"We are brothers and sisters, children of God and honest before God about the pain we endure. No part of our world will be lost to God, no experience rendered worthless, no level of human pain ignored or cast aside. God is the father standing at the gate to welcome home, the woman ensuring by her care that no coin is lost, the One going before us to prepare, eternally and lovingly expressing the being of God. Grace and mercy do not cease to be at the finite boundary of our lives."

That is the covenant God has made with us, that is the covenant of his love: that even the horror of his death is not the defeat of love but the beginning of resurrection and new life. That is our hope, that the best wine has been saved until now, a wine which all, all are invited to share.