

## Sermon Water into Wine: Epiphany II 2011...

I don't think Our Lord would have been much good at being a celeb. *And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee.* Not in Westminster or Chelsea or Windsor. Cana was only an insignificant village not far from those other insignificant villages, Capernaum and Magdala by the Sea of Galilee. And when we say *sea*, it's not much of a sea: rather like one of the larger lakes in The Lake District. Galilee is at the northernmost end of the great rift valley which stretches all the way back into Africa and it is 600 feet below sea level. A beautiful place with gently undulating green hills sloping down to the lake. It is warm. The light is mellow and mysterious and the surface of the lake is all reflections of the Golan Heights. Little fishing boats on the lake not much different from those used by St Peter and St Andrew. The spectacular Mount Hermon towering to 9000 feet. And at the southern end of the lake the river Jordan meandering its way down to the Dead Sea

*And the mother of Jesus was there.* St John's Gospel never refers to Mary by name, but always in this form *the mother of Jesus*. We are told, *And both Jesus was called and his disciples to the marriage.* We actually know that there were five disciples and their names, because in the previous chapter St John told us they were: Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip, John and Nathanael. The wedding was of friends of the family and that is why Mary was already at the house helping them get ready.

Marriages in those times began in the evening and the bride, covered from head to foot in her flowing veil and garlanded with flowers, was escorted from her house to the bridegroom's house. He would come out to meet her for the ceremony and celebrations that went on for up to ten days. *And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus said unto him, They have no wine.* Most scholars think that, comical as it sounds, they had no wine because Jesus and the five disciples had drunk it. Six extra guests at a small country wedding would, after all, make quite a difference. It was, and still is, a disgrace in the Middle East not to offer generous hospitality and the bridegroom would have been ashamed to learn that the wine had run out.

*Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come.* This is not as rude as it sounds. In fact it is not rude at all. The word *woman* - *γυναικ* in the Greek – is not disrespectful. It was a tender, form of address and we find it quoted of the Emperor Augustus to Cleopatra and In Aeschylus it is the greeting of the chorus to Queen Clytemnestra. Jesus uses the word again from the Cross when he gives his mother into the care of St John: *Woman, behold thy son.*

*There were there six water-pots of stone...containing two or three firkins apiece.* The amount of water made wine was thus somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons. There is something of a comedy about this story. Consider: the *ruler of the feast*, the *αρχιτρικλινος* – the head waiter

or *arbiter bibendi* – didn't know that the water had become wine *but the servants which drew the water knew*. Remember, we are not even told the names of the wedding couple. Jesus is a great spiritual teacher, but there is no sermon, no words from him about the sanctity of marriage. No prayers. No hymns. No readings. All the emphasis is on the wine and the little joke which rounds it off. *Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse. But thou hast kept the good wine until now*. It is a comedy in which no one quite knows what's going on. The sort of thing around which Mozart might compose a comic opera.

St John tells us *This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee*. What is it all about? Well, the word St John uses for *miracle* is not the usual  $\delta\upsilon\nu\alpha\mu\iota\varsigma$  – meaning an act of power – but  $\sigma\eta\mu\epsilon\iota\omicron\nu$  - which means a sign. What then is it a sign of?

It is a sign, a revelation, of the truth that Jesus is the Messiah. Readers of St John's Gospel would know the scriptures. Amos who prophesied that when the Messiah comes *The mountains shall drop sweet wine*. The book *Genesis* says the Messiah *will bind his foal unto the vine and his ass's colt into the choice vine*. And something very much like the wedding at Cana was prophesied 700 years before the event by Isaiah: *As a young man marrieth a virgin, so shall thy sons marry thee; and as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee*.

But St John goes much further than the claim that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the Son of God. And the scene at Cana evokes that most mysterious passage in the Old Testament when *Melchizedek, King of Salem, brought forth bread and wine; and he was the priest of the Most High God*. *Melchizedek* means *righteous King* and St John means us to understand that Jesus is the Righteous King. So this is a comedy, but it is a divine comedy.

But there is a deep darkness at the heart of the comedy. Recall those lines in *The Journey of the Magi* when the wise men come to the manger and they ask, *Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?* St John begins the story of the wedding at Cana saying, *And the third day*. Why say that? Because he is pointing forward to the three days of Our Lord in the tomb. And the abundance of the wine is a sign of the outpouring of Christ's blood for us on the Cross. In our culture we tend to associate blood with death, but in the Bible blood is the supreme sign of new life. This is the new life which Christ purchases for us by his death – the life that he said he wanted us to have *more abundantly*. At Cana he said to his mother, *Mine hour is not yet come*. His hour came on Calvary and the shedding of his blood.

There is more. The Gospels were not written to be stored in libraries. They were to be read aloud at celebrations of the Holy Communion by the persecuted Church in private houses. The practice was, from the earliest days of Christianity, for the deacon to read the Gospel and then

the priest to consecrate and distribute the Sacrament of the Bread and Wine. The wine at the wedding in Cana is a sign – to use St John’s word again σημειον – of the wine of the Eucharist, the Blood of Christ. You should be encouraged when you think that what we are doing this morning – reading this Gospel of water into wine and then drinking from the Chalice – is a re-enactment of the original miracle.

In those days it was the bridegroom’s responsibility to provide the wine for the wedding. Christ provided the wine. He is the bridegroom and we the Church, the bride...*the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.* The Church as the bride, as the new Jerusalem comes to replace the Jerusalem where Melchizedek was once King, the Jerusalem *passed away* and in its place the Church, the Bride of Christ, envisioned as an eternal city.

Scholars from the comparative religions school tell us that there are similarities between the old wine god Bacchus, or Dionysus, and Christ. Both offer liberation – either actually or sacramentally – through wine. But the liberation which Dionysus provides is liberation from the tyranny of the self by means of inebriation, self-forgetfulness, ecstasy – εκστασις - which literally means *standing outside yourself*. Or as they say nowadays, being *completely out of it*

The liberation which Christ brings is not freedom from the self. Our Lord offers us, through the sacramental life of devotion and his gift of Grace through the wine of the Altar, the possibility not of self-forgetfulness but of transformation, transfiguration, redemption. Christ does not offer επος but αγαπη – Christian people living lives of self-giving and sacrifice. If we follow where he calls, he offers us our lives fulfilled and restored. He promises not escape from yourself but instead he wants to give you yourself as God meant you to be. For, also in St John’s Gospel, he said, *I am the true vine and ye are the branches. He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit.*

*Draw nigh and take the Body of the Lord, and drink the Holy Blood for thee outpoured; Saved by that Body, hallowed by that Blood, whereby refreshed we render thanks to God*