

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY 2022

Isaiah 62:1-5

John 2:1-11

Today's readings from both the Hebrew scriptures and the Gospels are about marriage, but as a symbol rather than as a way of life.

As Tapiwa reminded us last week, the book that bears Isaiah's name consists of three books written at different times. Today's reading probably comes from a point after the return of the exiles from their captivity in Babylon. When Cyrus, king of Persia, conquered Babylon, he pursued a policy of allowing other nations to worship in their own way and allowed captives to return to their own countries. So the Israelites returned from their long exile. In contrast to the message of joyful restoration proclaimed in Second Isaiah, they came home to a ruin, to desolation, to a dump. Jerusalem is Forsaken and Desolate.

It is in this climate of despair that the author of the third part of Isaiah writes his hymn of hope. He says he will not be quiet, and he will not rest until the restoration of Jerusalem is as clear as the dawn. You will be restored, he says, to beauty and glory, like a finely polished jewel. The land and the people will have new names. The people will be called no longer "Forsaken" but "My delight is in her" (could this be a wedding toast?). The land will be called no longer "Desolate" but "Married", for God will rejoice over the people like a bridegroom over his bride. Clearly, marriage for this writer is a symbol of hope, a symbol of a settled future.

Something similar is happening in the story of the wedding at Cana. It's significant that Jesus' first miracle isn't about responding to desperate human need. Jesus isn't feeding the hungry or healing the sick or delivering those possessed by demons or even raising a dead person. There is no crisis here except the crisis of embarrassment at running out of wine for a wedding feast. So what is going on here? It's a simple story with many layers of meaning.

On a very human level, there is a message about the enjoyment of created things and human celebrations. Jesus is present at the wedding, sharing in the joy and happiness of the occasion. His provision of wine is extravagant – somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons! Not only is the wine great in quantity; it is high in quality. Wine in the Bible is always a symbol of joy and celebration. Jesus says to Nathanael, "You will see greater things than these", and here is the first of them. The sign is a manifestation of abundant grace, that "grace upon grace" the prologue of the gospel refers to. Grace is not something we have; it is something God does. Epiphany is about revelation, but revelation is not always about awe and majesty and mystery, what we might think of as the divine nature of Jesus. When God shows up, sometimes the result is joy, delight, even surprise, and abundance. Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine, and he enjoys a good party. The sign of changing water into wine points us to God, who is the source of all life and joy.

The image of the wedding feast is often used in the Bible as a picture of the restoration of Israel, and wine symbolizes the joy of salvation. Isaiah 25:6 speaks of the day when God will make "a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine" for all peoples – and that is another

theme of Epiphany – that salvation is for everyone. These images were a central part of Jesus' teaching and activity. Think of the parable of the guests who refused to come to the banquet (or the wedding, depending on if you're reading Matthew or Luke), the meals eaten with disciples and critics alike, the offer of table fellowship to tax collectors and sinners. By word and deed, Jesus proclaimed the breaking in of the age of complete fellowship and communion between God and humankind. We can see the wedding at Cana as an acted parable, proclaiming that the promise of the wedding feast is fulfilled. The new age is here.

When the wine begins to run short, Jesus' mother (she is never named Mary in John's gospel) approaches him. She's saying, "It's time." She pushes him into the beginning of the ministry that will lead to his death. It costs her to bring about the beginning of her son's public life.

Jesus seems to answer in a way that seems quite rude to our ears. "Woman, what is that to you and me?" He addresses his mother the same way, as "Woman", in her only other appearance in John's gospel – at the foot of the cross when Jesus gives her into the care of the beloved disciple. She is present at his first sign and at its fulfillment on the cross. In answer to her request at the wedding, Jesus says "My hour has not yet come." In John's gospel, Jesus' "hour" means the hour of his glorification, the hour of his passion, death, resurrection, and return to the Father. It is on the cross that Jesus fully reveals the glory of self-giving love. The best is saved for last. The water of purification is replaced with the choicest of wines. Existing religious institutions that were meant to bring people closer to God are replaced by Jesus himself. He is now the way into relationship with God.

Then John tells us, "This is the first of the signs by which Jesus revealed his glory and led his disciples to believe in him." Here we have reached the most important part of the story, the point to which John has been leading. A sign conveys a message, usually an important message. A sign stands in place of and points to something else. Some biblical scholars call the first thirteen chapters of John's gospel "The Book of Signs". This first sign has the same purpose as all the others: it tells us something about Jesus, who he is and what he does. What is important is not how the water was changed into wine, not Mary's role, not the reaction of the steward or the servants. What is important, and what we need to focus on, is Jesus himself, who he is and why he has come.

All these meanings, and probably more, are operating at different levels in this story. When we read it in isolation, we may be tempted to see it as some kind of benevolent magic. In fact, the early chapters of John's gospel are very carefully constructed. The wedding at Cana takes place "on the third day". But the third day after what? John is deliberately modelling his gospel on the opening chapter of Genesis. Both begin with the same words, "In the beginning". Both outline a sequence of days, each day with its own event. To put the wedding story into context, we need to go beyond the prologue of John's gospel that is so familiar to us from the Christmas season and read the rest of the first chapter. On the first day, John the Baptist states that he is not the Messiah. On the second day, he points to Jesus as the Lamb of God. The next day after that, Andrew and Peter follow Jesus; the next day, Jesus called Philip and Nathanael. Then on

the third day after that, the seventh day of this new creation story, there is a wedding at Cana in Galilee.

Now, you will remember that on the seventh day of the original creation, God rested, and that day became the origin of the Sabbath, the Jewish day of rest. The Sabbath rest in turn became a symbol for the messianic age and the completion of God's plan, the number 7 being the Jewish number of perfection. Against this reading, the story of the wedding at Cana takes on yet another layer of meaning. The followers of Jesus live in the age of the new Sabbath. As the first Sabbath completed the old creation, the transformation of the water of purification into abundant and superb wine completes the new creation. In the homely image of a village wedding, the eternal Word who was at the beginning, through whom all things came into being, is revealed as the One who completes the eternal purposes of God.

The extravagant sign of changing water into wine is a sign that, in Jesus, life, joy, and salvation have arrived. Later in John's gospel, Jesus will tell us "I came that they might have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and especially recently, public health officials have told us we need to "learn to live with" the virus (a phrase I hope never to hear again when this is over – I'm making a list). During the long lockdown last winter, it sometimes felt to me that I wasn't living; I was existing, and it sometimes feels that way this year too. As the online commentary from Working Preacher (www.workingpreacher.org) says, abundant life is more than mere existence or survival, and certainly more than an abundance of material goods. Abundant life is to know and be known by the One through whom all life came into being. It is to have an intimate relationship with the God who doesn't know how to stop doing good things for us. Of course, abundant life does not mean the absence of sorrow and suffering. I've said many times that faith is not a vaccine against trouble. We know that all too well through this pandemic. But abundant life does mean that, in Jesus, we have an abundant, extravagant source of grace to sustain us and to give us joy even in times of disappointment and struggle. Abundant life means that in Christ, we are joined to the source of true life, life that is rich and deep and eternal, life that neither suffering nor sorrow, nor even death itself, can destroy.

The revelation of God in Christ shows us what the reign of God is like. It is like a village wedding to which everyone is invited and where the guests are surprised and delighted at the abundance provided for them. This first sign from Jesus shows us that the bridegroom has arrived (John 1:29), and he is truly the life of the party!

Conclusion

"The Miracle at Cana", Malcolm Guite, *Sounding the Seasons*

Here's an epiphany to have and hold,
A truth that you can taste upon the tongue,
No distant shrines and canopies of gold

Or ladders to be clambered rung by rung,
But here and now, amidst your daily living,
Where you can taste and touch and feel and see,
The spring of love, the fount of all forgiving,
Flows when you need it, rich, abundant, free.
Better than waters of some outer weeping
That leave you still with all your hidden sin,
Here is a vintage richer for the keeping
That works its transformation from within.
“What price?” you ask me, as we raise the glass,
“It cost our Saviour everything he has.