

20160117SecondAfterEpiphany

The Gospel reading for today is one of my favourites. No, not just because Jesus changed water into wine! But because there are so many different themes and symbols in this short eleven verse-long story. After reading the passage earlier this week, three possible sermon themes immediately came to mind. Firstly, Jesus was at a marriage. How appropriate that the Anglican Communion Primates were meeting in Canterbury this past week with same-sex marriage being a possible reason for schism within the Communion. Secondly, John tells us that this was the **first** sign Jesus carried out – what are these signs, what is their significance? Then there is the miracle of water into wine – why did John consider this to be so important? What is the significance of some of the details – such as it being wine of good quality, the use of stone water jars normally used for purification, Jesus' initial negative response to his mother's request? So much available to explore

Yes, the Wedding at Cana of Galilee is a beautiful story, a beautiful story of celebration. But there are problems in its details. You see, the story makes no sense, perhaps because celebration is infinitely beyond sense, beyond what our senses can appreciate and understand. John's Gospel is often described as an onion. As you remove one layer of meaning, another layer is right there, waiting to be removed as well. But let's try and see what John was trying to say to us his readers.

The first odd thing is the lack of presence of the bride and groom in the story. The steward reports on the quality of the wine to the groom – we don't hear his response, however, and no mention is made of the bride. So how does this affect the story? Well, it makes Jesus the centre of the story and with no bride mentioned it puts **us** into the position of the bride of Jesus: as Isaiah said in our first lesson: "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you." So, the story is not primarily about a wedding or shortage of wine or signs. It is about us and Jesus and the interaction of Jesus and God in our lives.

Another oddity is the scarcity of wine. Firstly, we must remember that Cana was a poor village and thus the bride and groom might not have been able to afford to have plenty of wine available, especially if additional guests such as Jesus and disciples were there. So perhaps their supply just couldn't meet the demand. The first readers of John's Gospel would most probably have thought about a time later in John's Gospel, when another sign takes place, when Jesus miraculously supplied bread to feed the multitude in the wilderness. There, as here, Jesus counters scarcity with extravagant abundance.

We must remember that we read a short passage from the Gospels each Sunday, but that passage has a context within that Gospel. What went before or what follows it is significant in interpreting the passage.

Jesus saw himself as coming to replace the Temple as the primary place where heaven and earth meet — a "thin place" the term used in contemporary spirituality. Later in John chapter two, John makes this point more clearly by placing at the beginning of Jesus' ministry the demonstration in the Temple, where Jesus cleared out the money changers and traders. And he ends his account with words from Jesus that makes his replacement of the Temple explicit: "Destroy this Temple," replied Jesus, "and I'll raise it up in three days." "It's taken forty-six years to build this Temple," responded the Judaeans, "and are you going to raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking about the "temple" of his body. (John 2:19-21).

The six stone jars, that Jesus tells the stewards to fill, were used for the Jewish rites of purification. Another oddity is the size of those jars. They could contain 100 litres each, that is a total of 600 litres. At that size and capacity it would be more suitable for use in the temple than for a home in the village of Cana. They refer to a very prominent part of Jewish life in the first century: these jars are supposed to hold water for purification. That would be a lot of purity, but the jars are **empty** and this is significant in the overall telling of this story. Were the people pre-occupied with the problem of impurity? What does that say to us about **our** purity or lack thereof? Purity laws and rituals tend to divide humans arbitrarily into 'clean' and 'unclean'. What I'm trying to say is that purity always creates a scarcity of purity, especially of pure people. We go about judging who is **pure** enough to be part of "our church", **pure** enough to be "our friend". Looking at the Old Testament reading again we see quite the opposite of God's marriage with all God's people. *You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder [that is God] marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.*

The Wedding at Cana introduces the theme of Jesus replacing the temple through his replacement of water in the ritual jars with wine. The purification process controlled by the Temple authorities is being liberated by Jesus for truly life-giving possibilities.

The water with which the attendants fill the jars also suggests baptism to the reader. The water made into wine is a festive drink but it also looks toward Jesus' death as does the bread to feed the multitude in the wilderness. All this has strong Eucharistic symbolism, linking to the story that immediately follows our Gospel, of Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple, which is one of the events that drove the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem to plot the death of Jesus, and this further suggests that the water and wine refer to the Passion. All this symbolism is like analysis of poetry you used to do in Matric or at university. Just because the Gospel is a kind of biography doesn't mean we should ignore the poetic metaphors and symbols in the writing.

The stone jars are not for wine, but for ritual washing. And note they need filling; they are depleted. Jesus is not rejecting the jars and what they stood for; he is filling them. You could say that he is filling the rituals with meaning and then transforming them.

This story, then, is really about the collision between the ministry of Jesus and the conventional religion of his time. Now, in case you think that I'm being anti-Semitic by attacking the Jewishness of the conventional religion of Jesus' time, we could say that there is always a collision between the ministry of Jesus, or the direction of the Holy Spirit that Jesus left us, and the conventional religions of any time – times past, times present and times future. This is what is called paradigmatic collision. What I mean by this is that us human beings are continually changing: our paradigm for existence changes. Some might think of this change as progress, others as just doing things differently. And so as we look at religious faith around us and to which we belong, hopefully, the ministers of our religious faith are continually challenging us to look afresh at what we believe and see how it is suitable for our contemporary age. Under the power of the Holy Spirit we experience the collision I've referred to and a paradigm shift occurs.

Notice too how Jesus rings the changes so gently. This transition from one dispensation to another is not a rejection, but filling it and transforming it. A continuity and a discontinuity at the same time. Doesn't it remind you of us Anglican – some have move on with our APB 1989, some are still using the old SAPB. The devout Jews of Jesus' time were accustomed to these rituals and clung to them, not only because they ordered life but also because it gave them an identity. So when Jesus begins to offer an alternative, he runs into the fundamental human phenomenon of our clinging to such rituals.

The fact the John described what happened in Cana as a sign is also significant. In using the word "sign" John really means "clue", clue to a series of signposts which he uses to take us through the Jesus story. The signs are all occasions when Jesus did, you might say, what he'd just promised Nathanael that he would do a few verses before this story at Cana. These signs are moments when, to people who watch with at least a little faith, the angels of God are going up and coming down at the place where Jesus is. They are moments when heaven is opened, when the transforming power of God's love bursts in to the present world. The whole point of the "signs" is that they are moments when heaven and earth intersect with each other. That's what the Jews believed happened in the Temple and what we believe happens through Jesus.

Now, in the this homily I've covered lots of ground and many different themes and symbols. My first Rector after I was ordained used to say that in my sermons I should be able to summarise what I am trying to say in one short sentence. So how can I summarise in one sentence what I have spoken about so far? **At the wedding at Cana, Jesus gave a sign which told of what was to come, where change would occur.** But remember Cana was a backwater in a backwater, a place of no significance. The temple in Jerusalem was *the* centre of Jewish religion and culture. As with the outcasts at the manger, this wedding party is in the backwater, not the centre. But In this new centre, Jesus calls all of us to the party, the party that transforms the body and blood of Jesus into bread and wine of feasting and rejoicing, a party open to all of us. Jesus has indeed, as the steward said, saved the best wine until last.