

EPIPHANY II

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee. John 2:1

Oh, the wedding at Cana! I love it. I believe this is the first time at St John's that this Gospel has fallen on a Sunday; it's included in the Revised Common Lectionary, which we began to use just a couple of years ago.

But I have preached often on the story. Strangely, although the Prayer Book marriage service claims *that our Lord Jesus Christ adorned this manner of life by his presence and first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee*, the Prayer book does not go on to include this passage from John in its recommended Gospel readings for use in ceremonies of Holy Matrimony. However, I often suggest it to people who are not, let us say, in the first blush of youth when they marry. *You have kept the good wine until now* always seems to me like an appropriate and welcome blessing on mature marriages.

Of the four canonical gospels, John is the one I feel most ambivalent about. John is the last canonical gospel to be written, and has very different purposes from the other three. It assumes knowledge on the part of the audience of the other gospel narratives, so John doesn't repeat all of that. And John was writing for a community that was beginning to part ways with their Jewish origins, and to distinguish themselves as "other."

That separation accounts for the elements of John that have become most problematic or offensive, his frequent allusion to "the Jews" when what he would have meant, in terms of historical narrative, as "the authorities." In John's gospel, particularly as he comes to relate Jesus' arrest, trial, and execution, it's easy for readers to perceive "the Jews" as the enemy. Consequently, John has been responsible for much anti-Jewish sentiment over the centuries, incorporating a misguided assumption that "the Jews" killed Jesus. And that sentiment and its rationale have, as we know, been responsible for major atrocities, the Holocaust being the most horrific.

Another consequence of John's situation in a developing "Christian" community is that his gospel is long on what we call *Christology* – the theology of the Risen Christ. John is telling us, often at great length and in very abstract and imperial terms, what we believe that makes us Christian. I don't love abstraction, and I don't love imperialism, so those long sections of John don't do much for me.

And then, another problem is that many points of John's theology have been used to articulate the kind of Christianity that I said last week makes me sometimes cringe to call myself a Christian. Exclusive Christianity. Judgmental Christianity. Christianity that focuses

on personal salvation and individual sin rather than social justice – the salvation of the world. All those bumper stickers and roadside signs about salvation and so forth? They're all John.

That said, other dimensions of John that are without equal, and his stories are in that category. I said last week that gospel stories tend to read like flash fiction. And so do John's – they are never (regrettably) as long as the windy discourses he puts in Jesus' mouth. But they are often more extensive than those in the synoptic gospels, and they are complex and intriguing. The characters stay with you – or with me – in my imagination and my prayer life. They are open to diverse interpretations. And they generally raise more questions than they answer, which, as you know, is my kind of theological thinking.

Here are some questions raised by the story of the wedding at Cana. Who's getting married? Who issued invitations to the wedding? Why was the family of Jesus there? What gave Jesus' mother (who remains nameless through John's whole gospel) any reason to believe that Jesus could relieve the wine shortage? Did she expect a miracle or did she think Jesus and his guys would go off to the nearest vineyard and come back with more supplies? Where did the servants get about 150 gallons of water – the amount changed into wine – in the first place? In first century Palestine that would be quite a feat in itself, let alone the transformation Jesus effects. What does the groom think when the steward gives him credit for saving the good wine till last? He had nothing to do with it. In fact, what's the groom's reaction to the sudden rescue of his wedding hospitality from social disaster?

All of these are mysteries. Unresolved, leaving an open field for us to guess, to speculate, to imagine.

And here's a basic question, too. Why does John locate Jesus' first miracle at a wedding? This is, for John, Jesus' coming out party, if you will. This is his first act of public ministry. Last week we heard Luke's version of Jesus' baptism, which parallels in important respects Mark and Matthew. Jesus is baptized by John, claimed by God, and then goes out into the desert. This is the beginning of his public life, and the transition from private life to public ministry. And his first visible acts of ministry will be teaching in the temple, once he returns from the desert.

But John says nothing about the desert experience. Rather, he goes from the baptism account right to the calling of the disciples, and then, in Chapter 2, to the wedding at Cana. This is the first witness Jesus' to an aspect of Jesus' special powers – his capacity to perform miracles or, as John calls them, signs.

It's also an Epiphany story. John has no birth narrative, no account of the journey to Bethlehem, the manger, the shepherds, the angels, the star, or the Magi. Jesus' "glory", which

is a big deal, a major theme, in John, is not revealed by angels and a special star, but by his actions at this wedding. The portion concludes, *Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and the disciples believed in him.*

Scholars of John have a great deal to say about signs, and about glory. This is what we call “high Christology,” very abstract and divinity focused, and I find it tough sledding. One of the commentaries I read on this gospel portion is most insistent, for example, that Jesus does not perform a miracle, but rather, a sign – a symbol of his divinity. In this view, transforming water into wine is not a response to human need, it’s all about demonstrating God’s power through Jesus.

Moreover, the commentator remarks that Jesus is not acting in response to his mother’s bidding, but according to God’s will. He says that Jesus distances himself from his mother, saying, as indeed he does, “Woman, what concern is that to you and me?” or, in an older translation, “woman, what have I to do with you?”

Now, that’s not a very flattering view of Jesus. He comes off at first as a guest unconcerned that his host has a beverage crisis. And he’s rude to his mother.

But it’s a very human picture of Jesus, and that intrigues me much more than the talk of signs and glory. I mean, who among us has not blown off an instruction from our mother, only to turn right around and do what she said after all?

I’ve been reading my mother’s journals, and she writes in one place of a remark I made to her once, which she also quoted back to me while she was still living; I told her, “I don’t need a friend right now, I need a mother.” But I’m sure I’d told her at some earlier point that I needed a friend more than a mother. We don’t always give consistent messages to our parents, do we? Or behave in consistent ways?

Indeed, Jesus is not portrayed anywhere in the gospels as having an easy relationship with his family. They don’t get his ministry, he complains. At one point he disowns them altogether. And in places he tells all his followers to leave their families. Like many of the words put into Jesus’ mouth by the gospel writers, these notions are not quotations from the Nazarene; they are directives to Christian communities, forming after Jesus’ death, about where their allegiances need to lie. *If you have to choose between family and Christianity, choose the latter, is what they mean.*

Nonetheless, these portraits of difficulties between Jesus and his family, this dispute here with his mother, make him a very human figure. And viewing him this way, focusing on the commonalities he shares with us in our social and interpersonal relationships, brings him

closer to me – much closer than exclusive emphasis on the signs and glory that emphasize his closeness with God, at some cost, it seems, to his closeness with us.

And to return to something I said earlier, *Jesus’ “glory”, which is a big deal, a major theme, in John, is not revealed by angels and a special star, but by his actions at this wedding.* And his “coming out” as a person with extraordinary powers does not occur in a synagogue, as we will hear about next week in Luke. It happens at a party, a wedding, the most social of events. And while the story leaves us with many unanswered questions, it also provides some marvelously down-to-earth details. The steward comments, *Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk.* Again, who among us has not followed that policy at one party or another?

I opened by quoting the Book of Common Prayer’s marriage service, *The bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation that our Lord Jesus Christ adorned this manner of life by his presence and first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee.* Actually, I usually remove this from the service, because I don’t agree with the theology. I don’t think God established the covenant of marriage, and while I think it’s great that Jesus performed his first miracle at a wedding, I don’t think he really meant to say anything about marriage. I think that was a happy accident.

As you all know, I feel passionately about the importance of marriage. But I think this theology takes us on a slippery slope to proscribing who can marry – because, Prayer Book again – *We have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the joining together of this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony.* Not in our best interests to go that direction! And I must confess that as I meditated on the Cana story, it occurred to me – John never says *who’s* getting married! No bride is mentioned. But I digress.

So, while I find the Prayer Book’s theology hazardous here, I do love the story of the wedding at Cana. It’s a great story to use for people entering matrimony in their maturity, and it’s a great story about Jesus. Despite the commentators, and in some ways despite himself, John offers us a very human Jesus here: irritable and rebellious toward his mother, at first apparently indifferent to the plight of his host, but ultimately responsive to what is indisputably a human need.

That’s the Jesus I love. That’s the Jesus I can’t get enough of.

Alleluia! Amen.

