

Reflection for Third Sunday of Epiphany – 24 January 2021

Reading: John 2. 1 – 11

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

"Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come."
His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.

Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realise where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now." This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.

Reflection

Today is the last-but-one Sunday in the season of Epiphany. Our readings for the season have jumped around in terms of the life of Jesus from the nativity to today's reading, which follows not long after Jesus' baptism and about 30 years after his birth and 28 after the appearance of the Magi.

The scene is, outwardly at least, a normal village scene – a wedding. It is clearly a large wedding – as they are in many cultures – and Jesus, his mother and his disciples had all been invited and have chosen to attend. Jesus and Mary were, no doubt, talking with their neighbours and all seemed to be going swimmingly. Suddenly, Mary tells Jesus that the wine has run out. Socially-speaking, this is a total disaster for the bridegroom. The social embarrassment that this would cause him – and, logically, by extension, his new wife – would have been difficult to measure. It doesn't take too much imagination to see other villagers whispering behind their hands in years to come 'Oh – look! That man ran out of wine at his wedding'. The clear implication would be that he had been too stingy to get married properly.

"Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come." It has always amazed me that Jesus could get away with responding to his mother in such a blunt way. How many of us, I wonder, would get away with addressing our mother as "Dear woman"? However, we need to come to that response in the knowledge that Middle Eastern customs were – and are – different to ours. It may be that "Dear woman" is acceptable. The other factor that needs to be taken into account is the fact that John did not write his Gospel in English but in Greek / Aramaic and so those who have translated it for us to understand may have chosen a translation that doesn't reflect the breadth of meaning of the original language.

Whatever the case might be, his mother ignored the implied rebuke and said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you.". Mar had come to realise that there was something special and different about her son – even if she did not understand the full implications of that. Her response shows a remarkable faith. Faith to take on the chin what we see as a rebuke and faith to box her son into a corner. Her instructions to the servants left Jesus no room for manoeuvre. Only Mary, I suspect, could have got away with putting her son into that position.

Just as Mary didn't appear to bat an eye-lid at Jesus' response to her, Jesus equally doesn't seem to flinch or protest at the position Mary had put him into. John tells us that "Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

The storage jars were used to hold water. But it wasn't water for drinking. Instead, it was used to wash people's feet as they arrived. By quirk – either because the number of guests was such that they had used it all – or because they had not been filled up in the first place – the jars were empty. Each jar held between 20 and 30 gallons, so their combined capacity was 120 – 180 gallons. That's a very large amount of water and it must have taken quite some time to fill them up. Having filled them up, as instructed, the servants drew the water again and took it to the Master of Ceremonies. But the water that the servants had used to fill the jars was not drawn out again as water – but as wine. And not just cheap wine either, but the finest. Small wonder that the bridegroom was surprised when the Master of Ceremonies complimented him on saving the best wine for last – when the custom was to serve the best first and then to serve the weaker, cheaper wine after the guests were too drunk to notice.

On the face of it, that is the meaning of this miracle – what John describes as the first sign that Jesus performed. However, if we dig below the surface, there is more to reveal. How appropriate for the season of Epiphany.

Firstly, Jesus brings about this transformation of the water by nothing more than his word. He did not – at least as far as we tell from John's account – touch the water and merely gave instructions to the servants – who followed them without question. Only God could bring about that sort of transformation by Word alone.

Secondly, Jesus became the bridegroom's saviour. At his birth, the Angels announced his birth to the shepherds telling them that a Saviour had been born in the city of David. Here, the bridegroom did not realise that he needed a saviour. Amidst the celebrations, he was confident that he had provided enough wine. As it turned out, his confidence was mis-placed. Nevertheless, unrequested (except by his mother) Jesus stepped in to rescue the bridegroom for his social disgrace.

Thirdly, we note that Jesus' intervention was anything but mean or stingy. Did he really need to change all 6 jars of water into wine? Did they really need 120 gallons of wine to complete the wedding celebrations? Possibly, or even probably, not. Regardless, that was the amount of wine that Jesus gave. Moreover, the quality of the wine was exceptional. God's grace knows no bounds and so it is that when he intervenes, he does so lavishly and extravagantly.

Fourthly, Jesus changed the purpose of the contents of the jars. In line with Jewish practice, the water from the jars would have been used for washing feet – external cleansing. Jesus took that water and changed it into wine. It is possible to see this act as pointing to the cross. At Cana, the water of external cleansing was changed into wine, which at the Last Supper, Jesus told the disciples was his blood that sealed the new covenant for the forgiveness of sins. That wine, of course, is consumed and so becomes inner cleansing of the sinful heart of us men and women. Cleansed from our sin, we can celebrate as the redeemed bridegroom was able to celebrate once the unknown shortage of wine at the wedding in Cana had been resolved.

At this point, we should note how John's account of the wedding scene opens. The initial four words are "On the third day" – a phrase that will come to resonate through the Gospels. Writing towards the end of the first century AD, John's use of this phrase would have been immediately picked up by the Christians to whom he was writing. On several occasions, Jesus used the phrase to predict his resurrection and its use here carries a significance into the scene that might otherwise be missed. John wants us to be in no doubt as to the identity of Jesus who attended the wedding. He is nothing short of The Word, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world", the Son of God, the

Christ and the Messiah. He is also the one who came to redeem the world from its sin and restore it to the magnificence that God originally intended.

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