

Wedding Symbols

John 2:1–11

Friends, last week in the gospel we heard about the baptism of Jesus, reminding us that amazing things happen when Jesus and water get together. So, it is wonderful that the Church's liturgy follows this up with Jesus's first miracle of turning water into wine at a wedding reception. The contours of this account in John's gospel are familiar to all of us, I'm sure, but they are worth retelling, because in John there is always more than we first hear.

Firstly, the context: Jesus and his disciples are at a wedding in the small town of Cana, in Galilee. Now, in scripture, weddings are a consistent biblical symbol for the mystical union between God and his people. "For as a young man marries a young woman," says Isaiah in our first reading, "so will your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so will your God rejoice over you." (Is.62:5). That's beautiful, evocative stuff, isn't it? There's a wonderful sense of intimacy (not by nature but by grace) that we share with God, our builder, our maker. We are not just slaves or servants made to do his bidding on threat of punishment or death; we are his bride, his beloved, in whom he rejoices, and for whom he willingly lays down his life.

Now, what's the fulfilment of this prophecy? Nothing other than the incarnation – God becoming flesh in the unity of the divine person, to form a marriage between divinity and humanity. This is the central teaching of Christianity – that God becomes one of us, so that we might be 'married' to him and thereby share in his divine nature. That's why Jesus associates himself right at the beginning of his ministry with a wedding, at which the wine tragically runs out.

Now, if a wedding is a powerful biblical symbol, so too is wine. Once again in Isaiah we hear of God's holy mountain on which a feast of "the best meats and the finest of wines" (Is.25:6) is served. And in the ninth chapter of the book of Proverbs, God is envisioned as a woman who sets out a great meal, preparing the meats and mixing the wine. And of course, the Passover meal – the central meal for the Israelites – involves a number of cups of wine. Wine, which delights the palate and lifts up the mind and the spirit, is evocative of the divine life, of the grace of God for us.

So, what do we have now, symbolically-speaking, in John's gospel? We have a wedding banquet at which the wine has run out. This is a metaphor for Israel lost in its sin. What's meant to be festive and life-giving has become dry and lifeless. However, to this wedding banquet in Cana – what Israel is meant to be, but the wine has run out – to this banquet, Christ comes who is himself the wine of the divine life, married to human flesh.

Now, at this point in the story, Mary, Jesus' mother, is introduced, and significantly she is speaking to Jesus. What she says addresses not simply the immediate need of an embarrassed family, but symbolically Mary's words address what the great prophets of Israel had been addressing for centuries: the wine of the divine life has run out. When Jesus hesitates, Mary turns blithely to the waiters and says, "Do whatever he tells you." (Jn.2:5). By the way, these are the last words we hear from Mary in John's gospel, and it couldn't be a better swan song for her, for like all of the prophets of the Old Testament, Mary is calling God's Church back to faithful obedience to the Torah, the will of God. Israel has become lost in the measure that it disregarded this prophetic voice: "Do whatever he tells you."

And so, do we. As Lutherans, I think we sometimes get caught up in the game of playing the Gospel against the Law, as if the Law is no longer necessary for us now that we have come to faith in Christ. But that's simply not true. While the Law does indeed reveal our sin just as it did for ancient Israel, that is not its sole purpose. The Law also directs us to "do whatever he – that is, God – tells you", and that's what today's second reading is all about (Corinthians 12:1–11). In it, St. Paul speaks about the gifts of the Spirit that are given to us as God's betrothed, given so that we might do whatever he tells us for the "common good". And in so doing, letting the love of God in Christ continue to be incarnated – enfleshed – through us.

Back to the wedding. So, what happens when the waiters do whatever Jesus tells them? Firstly, they fill six stone water jars to the brim. These jars, John tells us, were used for ritual purification, the ceremonial washing of hands and feet before a meal. Johannine scholars understand this as symbolising the rituals and spiritual life of ancient Israel. The number six is one less than seven – the number of perfection – thus indicating the incompleteness of these rituals. The water that has been sustaining Jewish life for centuries – the Law, the covenants, the prophets, the Temple, all the ritual and legal activity of ancient Israel – was certainly good and nourishing and life-giving – but it wasn't complete; it wasn't wine. It wasn't the fullness of what God intended for his people.

And this is what Jesus does when he quietly, matter-of-factly, transforms all that water (almost 700 litres of it) into wine. He doesn't disdain it or reject it; but instead he takes it and elevates it, transforming the ancient rituals of Judaism into the sacraments of the Church – holy baptism, through which God takes ordinary water and by adding his Spirit-filled Word transforms it into a life-giving spiritual washing; and the Lord's Supper – where the bread and wine are transformed into bearers of the joy-filled grace of God.

In this first of Jesus' signs, Jesus transfigures and elevates Jewish ritual life, and that transfiguration continues to go on here, in his Church, where he is present to lift us up again into his divine life through his Word and sacrament, so that we might be bearers of that life to the world, doing whatever he tells us by using our spiritual gifts for the common good.

The account of the wedding at Cana concludes with the head waiter speaking ironically about the fact that the usual method of serving wine is to serve the good stuff first, and then when people are three sheets to the wind, serve the inferior wine, because by that stage they won't know any better.

This too is very powerful, symbolically. The good wine that has been left to the end is the grace of God in Christ, the grace that fulfils all of the Old Testament prophecies and expectations. Now, at the end times, is when the new, superior wine – Jesus own divine life – is on offer to all. Take it, drink it, let it nourish and transfigure and elevate you. Let it transform you so that you might continue to do whatever he tells you, for God does indeed rejoice over you as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride. In the name of Jesus. Amen.