

John 2:1-11

This liturgical year will be devoted to the Gospel of John, which was the last Gospel, written between 90 and 110AD. John, who by this time was aged, was a living legend near the end of life.

Each Gospel writer wrote in a different place for a different audience. The Gospel of Mark was written in Rome, just after the great fire in 64AD. Matthew was probably in Galilee. His unique content was written for Jewish Christians suffering persecution in the synagogues community in Galilee. Scholars believe that Luke was probably written in Ephesus, where John wrote his Gospel. Initially, John's Gospel, although written for the Ephesians, was quickly circulated throughout the Roman province of Asia and beyond.

In Ephesus, John's first readers are in the centre of Emperor worship. His Gospel would have been extremely sensitive to any claim that Jesus or his followers would have made claiming him to be the Son of God, a title that belonged to the emperor.

Two weeks ago, we read John's version of the Baptism of Jesus. Last week, the first two disciples (Andrew and Nathaniel) followed Jesus. Today we move to the Wedding Feast. In the Gospel of John, what are called miracles in the other three gospels are called *signs*. A sign is an act that points to something else. John's gospel is often referred as the "Book of Signs." Chapters 2 to 12 contain seven of these signs -

miracles that point to the identity of Jesus. Seven is significant, since in ancient times the number seven was seen as representing wholeness or completion.

The first of the signs chronicled in John is the well-known narrative of water being changed into wine at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. This is the place where the Johannine themes are introduced. The Wedding at Cana is one of the oddest stories in the gospels, and is only found in John's gospel. It's not raising someone from the dead or healing someone with leprosy, it's not even the feeding of the five thousand. This event takes place at an incredibly ordinary event: a wedding.

During the start of the story we meet the first characters that carry the gospel's storyline. It's a mistake to literalize these characters or the signs of which they are so deeply a part. The author of the Fourth Gospel uses literary license to create memorable personalities who become the pillars around which he relates the themes of this Jesus story. It is important that we "read" and understand these characters as John, their creator, intended them to be read.

First, let's look at the role assigned to "the mother of the Lord" by John. The "mother of the Lord" makes only two appearances in John's gospel, one in this opening Cana story and the other at the foot of the cross near the end of the gospel. In neither episode is she ever called Mary and she is not nearly as significant a figure in the New Testament as Christian

history has portrayed her.

John continues to develop the Mary myth by building into his characterization of her the things he needs her to be and do in order to develop his story. Her first appearance is at the wedding feast. The mother of the Lord is cast in a central role.

The symbols are obvious. The transformation of water into wine will occur “on the third day.” The mother of Jesus stands at the nexus between the shortcomings of the ritual activity of the Jews and the celebration of the new life that Jesus came to bring - new life that is symbolized by the marriage ceremony.

Jesus is at a wedding with his mother and the disciples, in the town of Cana. Cana is not heard anywhere else in the gospels. The location was important. Cana was in Galilee, where Jesus was welcomed, which was unlike Judea, the more cosmopolitan Judea, where he was rejected. Galilee is also the place where Jews and Gentiles lived together. Having his first sign take place here shows that God in Jesus loves both Jew and Gentile and they have equal standing in the new community that Jesus is creating. This wedding that Jesus attended was not like modern weddings. In the ancient world a wedding celebration could last for up to seven days.

Someone had not planned well. There was not enough wine for the

wedding. The wine ran out before the party came to an end. Wine had a special place in that society. Wine was a sign of God's abundance, of hospitality. So, when the wine runs short, it means that abundance is limited. This was a major social faux pas. Jesus and his mother have an interesting argument about the issue.

The name of the mother of Jesus, Mary, is never mentioned in John. She tells Jesus that the party is out of wine. Jesus responds that this is not his concern, his time to be revealed has not come. Mary seems to ignore his complaint as she tells the stewards to do whatever he tells them to do. For Jesus, *his time* meant that he would be the one that would determine when he would reveal himself. However, his mother believed or knew that he could provide wine.

The mother of Jesus pushes her son to act in this crisis. He rebukes her, calling her "woman" and saying to her, in what seems like a harsh manner, that his "hour" has not yet come and no one can force it. The exchange between Jesus and his mother is the most interesting example we have of this mature relationship. The word "hour" is used many times in the Fourth Gospel to refer to Jesus' crucifixion and thus to the time of the ultimate revelation of who he is. When the Book of Signs, that is John's Gospel, is complete, Jesus announces that "the hour has come for the son of man to be glorified," and the drama of the cross begins to unfold.

In this Cana story, his mother retreats, but before doing so, she instructs the servants to “do whatever he says.” We should consider the environment that Jesus lived in. Production of wine by supernatural means was a common story in the Mediterranean world. Dionysus was the Greek god of wine. The Roman name for Dionysus is Bacchus. While this story seems odd to our modern ears, when this story was first told or read in ancient times it made perfect sense. When John’s first readers in Ephesus, where John was writing, hear of Jesus’ first sign, their minds would go to the god Dionysus. His myth includes turning water into wine. In their minds they must have understood the story as proof that Jesus had the power to take back from the pagan world the illusion of its power to transform. Dionysus was a myth. Jesus was a flesh and blood man known to John himself, who had witnessed in real life Jesus’ power and glory.

It is important to note how his mother brackets Jesus’ ministry. Here, he says “Woman, what does that have to do with me?” When he is on the cross, he sees his mother and tells her, “Woman, here is your son,” meaning John would take care of her from now on.

Jesus relented and asked the stewards to fill six stone jars with water. The jars are specifically made of stone rather than clay because stone does not pass on uncleanness. Vessels for ritual oblation were always made of stone. These jars were used in Jewish religious rituals. Jesus asked that a servant draw out a sample of the water and give to the head

steward. This was the person that made sure the wedding guests had food and wine so not having wine meant that blame rested with him. The steward never saw the stone jars being filled with water. The steward was confused when he tasted that water that was now wine. Where did it come from? He was probably also puzzled about why the groom (who was the host) decided to give such good wine at this point in the wedding. So he goes to the groom and tells him the following:

“Everyone serves the good wine first. They bring out the second-rate wine only when the guests are drinking freely. You kept the good wine until now.”

This is a long way of saying that the groom was viewed as breaking a major hospitality protocol. It was more common to offer the good wine at first and then bring out the cheap wine when the guests are so drunk they won't tell the difference. But Jesus offered the good wine on the third day.

The people wonder at the source of this wine, for if we literalize the measurements given, there would be more than 150 gallons of new wine, meaning that this symbol of new life was present in overwhelming abundance. This dramatic act, says John, created in the disciples faith, and “they believed in him.” The ordinary was converted to the extraordinary. John may be saying, similarly, that if all of us do as Christ tell us to do, then our ordinary lives can become extraordinary.

The first of John's signs is now complete, so Jesus, his mother and his

disciples go down to Capernaum and remain for a few days. This the final mention of the mother of the Lord until the scene of the crucifixion.

We need to remember that this is, first of all, *not* a miracle story. It is a “sign” pointing to something quite different from a supernatural event. Clearly in this story Jesus is the bridegroom, an image that we will see appear again shortly. He is calling Israel into a new status. The wine of the spirit has replaced the waters of purification. Who, then, is “the mother of the Lord?” She is developed in the Fourth Gospel as a mythological figure who stands for Israel, the faith tradition that gave birth to Christianity, and is one of John’s interpretive keys. It must come, however, only when all else is ready. It is shrouded in secrecy in this narrative, for we are told that no one knows the source of this transformation. At the proper time, all will be known, but the ultimate revelation will come only when he – that is, Jesus – is lifted up on the cross. The seed of the idea, so central to John, that it will be in the death of Jesus that his glory will be revealed, is planted.

That is a different note from any we find in the earlier gospels. John’s unique message, his transforming understanding, begins to come into view. We will watch it emerge slowly and steadily as his story unfolds. The mother of Jesus in this gospel is not a person; she is a *symbol*. When she appears again at the foot of the cross, the meaning of that symbol will become abundantly clear.

What is the significance of this story? Why is Jesus' first miracle changing water into wine? What does it say about God? Remember that John doesn't call what took place a miracle but a sign. A sign points beyond the act itself to show God. Jesus creates a huge amount of wine and it is not just any old wine, but very good wine, which is not what you would serve to guests three days into a wedding feast. What we see here is a God who gives abundant grace and love. Notice that it was the servants and not the steward that saw the sign taking place.

Like the feeding of the 5,000, this event shows a God that gives an abundance of love to all of us. It is a love that has no limit. In the Old Testament, wine is an example of deliverance from the exile. Amos says: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when the one who plows will overtake the one who gathers, when the one who crushes grapes will overtake the one who sows the seed. The mountains will drip wine, and all the hills will flow with it. I will improve the circumstances of my people Israel; they will rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them. They will plant vineyards and drink their wine; and they will make gardens and eat their fruit."

Once there was a King. The King was a good King. He was much loved throughout the Kingdom. The time came for the 50th Anniversary of his reign and he decided to throw a great feast that all would be invited to. The King would prepare the finest meats, sides and desserts, along with the merriest entertainment. He only had one request from his guests.

The King wanted each guest to bring a jug of their best wine to the feast. There would be a ceremony where each guest would be invited to pour their bottle into a large barrel. And then all would share the wine together. The wine would represent all the different regions of the Kingdom coming together to celebrate the King!

Well, it happened that a poor farmer was invited to the feast. The poor farmer had only one cask of wine. It was very old and expensive and he had been saving it for his daughter's wedding. He thought to himself: "I love the King. He is a good King and I want to honour him but I don't want to part with the only cask of wine I have. So what I'll do is fill a jug with water. People will be coming from all over the Kingdom. People far richer than I will be bring rich and rare vintages. No one will notice if there is a little water in the great big barrel."

When the time for the feast came, the poor farmer got in line with his jug of water, and when it was his turn, he poured the water into the barrel. Then when it was time for the feast to begin, the King stood to give a toast. He took his goblet and held it under the tap of the barrel as a servant slowly turned it. When the liquid came pouring out, everyone gasped. They had been expecting it to be deep and red. Instead, it flowed out of the barrel crystal clear. Each of the guests suddenly realized with shame what had happened. Each had brought water to the feast, expecting the others to bring the wine.

So Jesus turning water into wine is a sign of God coming in the form of Jesus to bring salvation and deliverance. Sociologist and pastor Tony Campolo once shared a story about giving a birthday party for a prostitute named Agnes. Campolo comes to a restaurant and meets Agnes and learns she never had a birthday party and her birthday was the next day. This was her reaction as he relates the story to his colleagues: Three-thirty in the morning, in come Agnes and her friends. I've got everybody set, everybody ready. As they come through the door, we all yell, "Happy birthday Agnes!" In addition, we start cheering like mad. I've never seen anybody so stunned. Her knees buckled. They steadied her and sat her down on the stool. We all started singing, "Happy birthday to you!"

When they brought out the cake, she lost it and started to cry. Harry, the diner owner, just stood there with the cake and said, "All right, knock it off, Agnes. Blow out the candles. Come on, blow out the candles." She tried, but she couldn't, so he blew out the candles, gave her the knife, and said, "Cut the cake, Agnes." She sat there for a long moment and then she said to me, "Mister, is it okay if I don't cut the cake?"

What I'd like to do, mister, is take the cake home and show it to my mother. Could I do that?" I said, "It's your cake." She stood up, and I said, "Do you have to do it now?" She said, "I live two doors down. Let me take the cake home and show it to my mother. I promise you I'll bring it right back." And she moved toward the door carrying the cake as

though it was the Holy Grail. As she pushed through the crowd and out the door, the door swung slowly shut and there was stunned silence. Talk about an awkward moment. Everyone was motionless. Everyone was still. I didn't know what to say.

The story ends with the owner of the diner chatting with Campolo and wondering who he really is: Harry leaned over the counter and said, "Campolo, you told me you were a sociologist. You're no sociologist, you're a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?"

In one of those moments when you come up with just the right words, I said, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at three-thirty in the morning." I'll never forget his response. He looked back at me. "No you don't, no you don't. I would join a church like that!"

This story is not just about changing water into wine, it's about how life in Christ is richer and more joyful than the ritualistic religion of first-century Judaism.

We worship a God that can turn water into wine and throw birthday parties for a hooker at three in the morning. Are we ready to see God shower people with God's grace?

Amen.

THANKSGIVING FOR BAPTISM

Blessed be the holy Trinity, +one God, the fountain of living water, the rock who gave us birth, our light and our salvation. **Amen.**

Joined to Christ in the waters of baptism, we are clothed with God's mercy and forgiveness. Let us give mercy and forgiveness. Let us give thanks for the gift of baptism.

We give you thanks, O God, for in the beginning you created us in your image and placed us in a well-watered garden. In the desert, you promised pools of water for the parched, and you gave us water from the rock. When we did not know the way, you sent the Good Shepherd to lead us to still waters. At the cross, you washed us from Jesus' wounded side, and on this day, you shower us again with the water of life.

We praise you for your salvation through water, for the water in the font, and for all water everywhere. Bathe us in your forgiveness, grace, and love. Satisfy all who thirst, and give us the life only you can give.

To you be given honour and praise through Jesus Christ, our living water, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

Amen.