

Reflection for Third Sunday after Epiphany. Gospel reading: Saint John 2. 1-11 (Genesis 14.17-20, Revelation 19.6-10)

Have you ever been annoyed by someone prodding you to do a good deed when you already had it in mind? If you have, you will know that it offends in a number of ways. First, it suggests that you are incapable of seeing a course of action for yourself and secondly it robs you of any un-coerced gesture of kindness or love which should be at the heart of our deepest human relationships.

John tells us, 'The mother of Jesus said, they have no wine'. The inference must be, 'Can't you, my son, do something about it?' Prod, prod. The situation was critical. It was far more than social embarrassment that was at stake when a marriage feast was inadequately resourced. More even than the danger that wife and husband would get off on the wrong foot. We know that marriages in Jewish societies (as in many others) were transactional events and there is even evidence that a groom who didn't provide a suitable banquet could be sued. One scholar suggests it could be as much as half the value of the gifts that invited guests like Jesus and his disciples were expected to provide. Couples may have had the same loving feelings to each other that you might wish for today, but there was a much harder edge to marriage then than our modern sentiments would like to admit. It was more a matter of 'I give, you give. Agreed?' Even today feuds and bust-ups can erupt at weddings when one side or the other doesn't meet their obligations. So, in this context Mary's words seek to bring home the seriousness of the moment to her son who, being single, may not fully grasp the situation! Jesus' response to her implied plea is, 'What's that got to do with you or me. My hour hasn't yet come.' That brings me to the place this event has in John's Gospel. It is really odd, to say the least, that Jesus' first miracle or 'sign' as John puts it, should be something that isn't immediately related to bringing release to the captive or proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour. In the first three Gospels Jesus' miracles are unambiguously bringing relief to the sick, the hungry, the despised, the terrified and the broken-hearted. We have to wonder, then, if John has something deeper in mind. Elsewhere, in the other six miracles he describes in detail, John very much does show this work of salvation at work through Jesus, so why not here?

The context matters, and we arrive at this wedding at Cana after a series of events marked by the phrase...'the next day' or 'the day after'. Now we get to this phrase, 'On the third day there was a wedding...' And after this wedding John makes a point of breaking this pattern by saying his stay in Capernaum was for an indeterminate 'few days'. John has brought us to the seventh day in his series since the start of Jesus' ministry, but it is also 'on the third day', that is, the third day since the last named event. The seventh day is sabbath – God's day of completion, our day of rest and worship. And the third day, as John's readers would know very well, is the day of resurrection – the last sign or miracle in his Gospel. Right at the start John echoes Genesis in saying 'In the beginning' was the Word. We shouldn't be surprised then if every event including this local wedding is linked to God's universal purpose. Jesus works this miracle on the 'sabbath' because, his Father is working still just as Jesus is working (5.17). This Gospel isn't a kind of 'who dunnit' novel. His readers were already Christians who knew the outcome of what happened, but our author wants them to realise *why* it happened. And at this wedding only the disciples and the workers (probably women) who drew the water knew the reality, while the master of the feast and other guests couldn't see the 'manifestation' of Christ's glory. Jesus' disciples came to see that the real marriage was Heaven wedded to earth. God cannot be coerced, even by obedience. What he freely gives can only be received in gratitude and wonder. You could say, we are represented by the bridegroom who is credited with something he didn't deserve...and how!

When Jesus commands the servants to fill the waterpots they are now doing something that should have been done but wasn't. They represent the Jewish Law and as such it is transactional ('I give, you give. Agreed?'). John makes it clear that he is both fulfilling the Law but also superseding it. As he says in his preface, "The law came by Moses, grace and truth come through Jesus Christ." (John 1.17). At this wedding feast in Cana Mary knew her son could save the day, if he chose. What she couldn't know is, how and why he was going to save the world. It wouldn't be by a transactional 'I give, you give' exchange between God and humankind. It would be when Jesus' hour had truly come and he spoke once more to Mary, with John at her side, saying, 'Woman, behold your son' and to John, 'Behold your mother'. This relationship wouldn't be one based on the transaction of mutual benefit but on a love which would draw a new family together. It was made possible because John and Mary, and all of us receive the best wine of Christ's own uncoerced giving of himself. Nothing 'made him' do it. To believe that truly is to receive that gift and pattern ourselves on it.

With love and prayer to you all, especially if you are all alone and not feeling strong at the moment. Richard.