

Cana is everywhere

a sermon preached on the
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st john's

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the lections: Isaiah 62:1-5, Psalm 36:5-10, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, John 2:1-11

Once every three years, in the 'Year of Luke', the Lectionary gives us this Johannine story commonly known as 'the wedding at Cana'. "Nothing could underline more effectively the reality of the incarnation than this revelation of the divine "glory" (1:14) in such a down-to-earth human context [as a homely village wedding]."¹

This must be one of the best-loved gospel stories among people who avoid churches. Perhaps because the Jesus in this story - unlike the Jesus often promoted by churches, who's always threatening to 'save' them - seems to simply be interested in the joy of life. Be that as it may, the story is subject to three distortions. I'll call them distortions of place, purpose, and persons.

Firstly, the distortion of *place*. The story leads to all manner of romanticisings about a village by the name of Cana. By the way, only John mentions Cana - and then, only twice, recording Jesus returning to Cana, in chapter 4, to perform the second of his 'signs'.² As with all the locations of Gospel action, Christians have tended to go off in search for the literal, concrete geographical site - not infrequently making erroneous claims.³ But geographical location is not the point of the gospel.

Instead of externalising gospel symbols - and in the case of Bethlehem and Jerusalem violently laying claim to it - Cana points to that place *within every human soul where the great wedding banquet is to take place*. 'Cana' is everywhere.

That leads to the distortion of *purpose*. People like this gospel, I suppose, because of the huge quantity, and the astounding quality, of wine. It evokes that part in us that, openly or secretly, hopes to have 'Grange Hermitage' served up to us. We all long for 'a miracle' - like a Lotto win - that would drop into our lap that which we can't ourselves grasp.

In every joke and light-hearted quip we make using today's gospel story as a way of reflecting our patterns of wine serving and consumption, we both get the point, and simultaneously miss it. Yes, a wedding feast that runs out of wine is something we can all identify with - precisely why this gospel story is attractive. But 'wine' - such as we might hope to have served up to us - is hardly the point of the gospel.

Notice that John does not call this gospel event a 'miracle'. Rather, it's called a 'sign':⁴ that which is intended to direct the observer's gaze beyond all things concrete, literal, historical, to the greater Reality. This is like an icon, which is never about itself, but always point beyond itself. Likewise, the Scriptures themselves are *not* the point, not to be the focus of our attention - that would be bibliolatry. Rather, their purpose is point beyond themselves - just as Jesus himself makes it clear that his purpose is to point beyond himself, to the One no one has ever seen.⁵

When we read the symbol of wine at the wedding feast in this way - not 'miracle' but as 'sign' - then we can recognise that Jesus is pointing to the fulfilment of the messianic age, when the marital relationship between YHWH and Israel is restored and completed.⁶

To put it another way, the point of this event is to do with the union of the opposites: the union of God and humankind, heaven and earth, Spirit and matter. The union of opposites is the birthing-table of "life in all its fullness",⁷ of abundance.

So this is not a story about a whole lot of wine, so much as a sign of the possibility of this union. And the abundance of wine at Cana perfectly mirrors the abundance, later on, of the bread that Jesus provides on 'the other side of the sea of Galilee'.⁸ All guests at this banquet become guests of the Bridegroom at the great wedding feast of the messianic age. No doubt it is for this reason that the church

¹ Brendan Byrne, *Life Abounding: A Reading of John*, Strathfield: ST Pauls, 2015, p52.

² John 4:46-54

³ See Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1966, p98.

⁴ John 2:11 Greek: *σημειων* *sēmeiōn*

⁵ John 1:18, 8:38, 12:49-50

⁶ Isaiah 62:4-6. See also Hosea 2:14-16

⁷ John 10:10

⁸ John 6:1ff

came to understand the Eucharist as the great 'marriage supper', the banquet in which the opposites are united.

In this light, we can see why the Lectionary offers this gospel during Epiphanytime: for Jesus' transfiguration of the merely domestic wedding feast into the banquet of the messianic age is surely a 'revealing' of the Divine purpose and glory. We are celebrating the birth of something new: what is the nature of this new thing? Nothing other than the new age made visible, manifest, fleshy! The messianic age is nothing less than the drawing of all people, indeed all things,⁹ into the Divine Heart and Presence, as one. 'Wine' is this new age of union.

So to the distortion of persons. I have already alluded to the fact that the Jesus of John's gospel does not say to us: 'Look at me, look at me!' The story is not really about Jesus. There is a world of difference between Christian faith in Jesus, and what could be termed Jesus-olatry, the making an idol of Jesus, into a miracle-working celebrity. As I have already noted, Jesus always points beyond himself.

The other person in today's gospel subject to literalising, concretising tendencies is of course "the mother of Jesus".¹⁰ Notice that in John's gospel this woman has no name. Her only other mention is at the foot of the cross, where, again, she has no name apart from 'mother'.¹¹ The fact of her being called 'Woman' by Jesus is considered by biblical scholars to be of tremendous significance.¹² For this Woman is the New Eve, "the mother of all those who through God's grace and their faith will be 'born again' with God's 'eternal life'".¹³ The gospel's supreme interest is the *new humanity which is coming to birth in the messianic age*.

Considered in this way, every person is a descendent of the New Eve, the Mother of the new humanity. Simultaneously, every person is to *become mother*, to be birth-giver to a renewed humanity.

So this is not really a story about Jesus, or Mary, but about the renewed humanity, about you and me and all humankind. The principal character in this story is you, and me, and all persons.

But we might look around at the mess of the world and say, well it doesn't look like the new age, so *when* are we to give birth in this way? The gospel makes it very clear that 'the hour' of fulfilment is not ours to direct - not even Jesus' mother is allowed that¹⁴ - but remains the work of Divine grace which transcends our limited conceptions of time and space. Like the historical mother of Jesus, only when we stand at the cross of the dying Son - beholding and submitting to Paschal Mystery - can 'the hour' become fulfilled in us.

For Cana is everywhere. Wine is the new age of union of the opposites. The principal characters in this new age are us.

The Eucharist points to this *evangelion*, this good news: that when we have truly submitted to the full dimensions of Paschal Mystery, then we ourselves will become the best wine kept till last,¹⁵ our lives overflowing in an astonishing abundance.

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⁹ John 1:3, 6:39

¹⁰ John 2:1

¹¹ John 19:25

¹² For a detailed treatment of this subject see Raymond Brown, pp107-109.

¹³ Brendan Byrne, p54.

¹⁴ John 2:4

¹⁵ John 2:10