The wedding at Cana

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Epiphany + 2: John 2 1-11 – The Wedding at Cana

Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and bless what you have given us.

Leaning there were six stone water jars…each holding 20 or 30 gallons. There’s a lot of food and drink that gets consumed in John’s gospel … an awful lot. So I thought it a good idea to say grace first.

In a former life, I used to teach English to people who’d come to live in Australia. One of my favourite times then was teaching groups of tram drivers and conductors in a tram depot in Melbourne. In one class, I had a student called Joe who’d come from Italy. In class conversations, it appeared that Joe seemed to spend most of his available energy on bottling home-grown vegetables, making tomato sauce and, of course, ensuring a plentiful supply of strong red wine. At our end-of-course party, Joe brought several flagons of his amazingly strong, rugged wine for everyone to enjoy. In fact he brought so much, I was worried he might run himself a bit short.

I asked him if he would, but he smiled comfortably: “Peda, I make-about-a tirdy gallon evera year; iss anuffa,” said Joe, with the serene confidence of a man fully prepared for any emergency life might bring. I think of Joe when I hear the story of the wedding at Cana and the hundred-and-thirty odd gallons of wine (500 litres).

A lot of church history … and a lot of the history of religions generally … tells us stories of people who’ve tried to get the food and drink thing under control so they can be free to concentrate on “higher” things … spiritual things.

But John's gospel says that separating the spiritual from the physical is not an option. John is much more concerned than the other three gospels with physical things; things you can touch, taste, see, smell or feel. It's John's gospel which starts by telling us that God who was the Word became a physical being in order to share our material existence with us: *the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us*[1:14].

God enjoys us so much – God is so fascinated by the things that make up our lives – that nothing short of being one of us could adequately express that delight and fascination. The Church celebrates the fact that a risen, ascended, physical, human body is forever a part of the Trinity we worship as our God; God is interested in bodies, and as today's Gospel reminds us, God likes food, drink and parties.

But in today's story, this fascination with joining in the fun doesn't seem to grab Jesus immediately. His Mother tells him that the wine has run out, and like any sensible Mediterranean guest, he asks what that has to do with them. He also adds, *"My hour has not yet come*." It hardly sounds like his mother's message was warmly welcomed. Yet undeterred, she turned to the servants and said they should do whatever Jesus told them to do.

We might be excused for feeling baffled here, but Johannine scholars Sherri Brown and Frank Moloney highlight the example of the Mother of Jesus here as a disciple par excellence. Just like John the Baptist had shown in the previous chapter, she showed true discipleship. In John's Gospel, this means trusting entirely in Jesus, pointing people's eyes towards him and teaching us to listen to him. The Mother of Jesus uttered a prayer; she was met with the discouraging deflection that we can so often feel as God's silence, and yet she trusts whatever he will do, and insists that others should also trust. She teaches us that prayers are heard.

Our next puzzle is this initial, seeming reluctance of Jesus

to act – was he worried whether this wedding feast should be the place to launch his public ministry? That would be understandable – once the course was set, there was no turning back. But there may also be a very human, kindly element to his hesitation too. Around the Mediterranean, a person's honour is their most valuable possession. If Jesus were publicly to fix the wine shortage, his host would lose face. Maybe Jesus was thinking of a way to fix the wine supply, and preserve his host's honour at the same time, so the wedding banquet could go on in uninterrupted joy.

In any case, that's precisely what he manages to do. Jesus meets two needs; the one his mother brought to him *there's not enough wine,* and also the fact that his host's honour is at stake. The way he meets these two needs is ingenious. He has the servants do everything; *they* fill the great water jars, *they* draw the new wine and *they* take it to the master of ceremonies. And, I'd guess on that day, *they* also begin their discipleship to this kind, thoughtful man. The MC and the guests think the host provided this wine. Two needs are beautifully met, more wine is provided, and the honour of the host is preserved. And for us, Christ's Glory is revealed.

Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and bless what you have given us. There's a link between this traditional table grace and the story of Jesus at the wedding of Cana. When we sit down to eat and we say this grace, we're saying that Jesus is at once a guest at our table, but that at the same time, he's the one who provides what we have on the table; just as Jesus was an invited guest at the wedding, but at the same time, provided that huge quantity of wine for the feast.

Jesus is a guest at each meal; at our dinner table and at the wedding feast. But at the same time, he's the one who provides what is served up to him and to everyone else.

We take all this a few steps further in our gathering today … and this is where that other comment of Jesus to his mother

needs to be mentioned … *My hour has not yet come* …. When Jesus talks about his *'hour having come'* in John's gospel, he's talking about his crucifixion (Jn 12.23–13.1). Soon, we'll be declaring together that we are the body of Christ – that by our gathering, we somehow constitute Christ in this place. Then in our prayer over the gifts, we affirm that everything we give to Jesus has come from him in the first place. And finally, as we rehearse the words of institution of the Lord's Supper …*this is my body, given for you…this is my blood poured out for you* … we declare that the bread and wine on our altar are somehow Christ in this place. This extraordinary chain of symbols gives us the Eucharist, where, as a friend of mine once put it, Jesus is both the host and main course. Amen