

The Wine at the Wedding

“You have kept the good wine until now.”

John 2:1-11

The scene is set in a home in the small village of Cana in a home filled with the joyful celebration of a wedding feast. Like most weddings it is the joy of a new hope given in the start of a new life that shines brightly in the coming together of two people pledging to bring their lives together for an unknown future.

The ceremony is over and the celebrations are in full swing. Jesus' mother is there helping to keep the supplies of food fresh upon the tables, fussing around, one would think, making sure that all the guests are well taken care of. The guests were expressing their joy at the occasion with their lighthearted chatter and robust dancing. Weddings are times of joy, even though the parents of bride and groom may see it as an ending rather than a beginning. It is an ending because it is a beginning. The son and the daughter are going away from the home in which they have found safety while they grew through childhood. The home that has nurtured them and given them the basis of a life that enables them to go off alone into the future.

But the beginning that creates the ending is the founding of a new home, a new life of two young people together, starting a new family taking the past into the future. And so whatever the wistful thoughts that might enter the minds of the parents, the occasion is one of joy and celebration. The best wine, the best food, the best entertainment – mostly provided by the guests themselves – is the order of the day.

Jesus and his disciples, having been invited to the wedding, arrive late after a three-day journey and Mary, seeing so many new guests tired and hungry from their travels, starts to worry about the provisions. The wine would run out, she feared, so she took her problem to her son. It's an engaging encounter this, between mother and son. She appeals to him for help, and he is not sure that he wants to be involved. But mother knew he would do what was necessary, and so gave orders that the servants were to obey him and do whatever he asked of them. You know the rest of the story: from the water drawn from the well came the finest wine of the feast.

The celebration went on and one can assume from the tone of the story that Jesus and his friends were participants in the celebration, and were a part of the merrymaking.

This story of the wedding feast is the first major story that John tells of Jesus' ministry. Matthew and Luke tell of the temptation in the wilderness and then some stories of the healing of the sick. Mark launches immediately into the stories of healing. Not one of the other Gospels tells this little story of the wedding feast. Yet John reports this as one of the seven signs that convey a special truth about Jesus' ministry. So for John this is not a throw-away story, rather it is one to be taken very seriously indeed. There are some features about the story that also suggest that John's placing this at the beginning of his gospel is not simply accidental. The climax of the Gospel is another feast at which wine is offered; there is another journey of three days that lead Jesus from the trial to the cross and then an empty grave. This climactic feast is one that seems to look forward to grief and separation but which really ends with the resurrection as a story of reunion with his disciples. The story of the wedding at Cana seems to point forward to that climactic future – to the feast that leads to Jesus' triumph over death and the moment of the full revelation of his Messiahship.

In other words John sees this story as a foreshadowing of the coming Kingdom. So what does John want us to see in this story that will help us to understand better what happened at that last feast and during those last days of darkness and agony?

There are, it seems to me, three things that we can look at that might help us to see something of the power of the gospel story as a whole. First, that this was a wedding, second that this was a feast, and third, this event signaled the beginning of a new life of togetherness.

First, then, what is the significance of this story being a story of a wedding? It does not take a lot of imagination to see that what happens in a wedding is that two people are joined together as one. The

significance of a wedding is that it is a ceremony of unification. The Kingdom brings with it a new life of unity and singleness of purpose. Because we have to a degree secularized the nature of marriage today the fundamental nature of marriage as a creation of a new family has partly been lost. But that is essentially the importance of the ceremony. It is the joining together of two people that they may be as one. This unity is a unity of purpose and a unity of mutual respect. The Christian life is a life of mutual understanding because at its base is the recognition that we are brought together as one family. But it is a family with the common regard for each other in love. The characteristic of a good secure marriage is the recognition of the duty of mutual love and reverence. The unity of our lives with each other in this new kingdom is fundamental to our lives together within the church. We recognize our togetherness by acknowledging our dependence upon each other, but also by our common commitment to Jesus as our Lord, and as our Saviour.

When we petition for forgiveness we should be driven to be forgiving to others. And forgiveness is a first motion towards unity. We may not have a common agreement about things, but we do recognize that we have a common dependence upon God as the one who makes it possible for us to live a life because we have been forgiven. And because we have been forgiven, we can forgive. Such a life brings the possibility of unity. The life of the kingdom, therefore, is a life of union one with another.

Second, this was a feast. It was a joyous occasion. But at the heart of the feast was a simple miracle. The nature of this miracle is interesting. No one is healed – and most of the stories in the Gospels about miracles are about healing. No one is granted forgiveness – and this seems to be at the center of so many of the stories of the miracles in the other gospels. In fact there is nothing about this miracle that is even close to the kind of miracle we usually associate with Jesus. Water is turned into wine. This is an extraordinary thing to do. Jesus is not trying to show off, he is not trying to demonstrate anything, and he is not trying to change anybody's life – yet he changes water into wine.

At the feast of celebration only the best will do. What does a family want in celebrating an occasion like this? Rarely will second best be good enough.

I remember Enid and I standing in the foyer of a Hotel in Tokyo as a wedding party drove up and disgorged their limousines before us. The bride looked spectacular in her marvelous white dress, the groom was immaculate in his tuxedo and the families were all dressed to perfection. Only the very best would do. Strangely enough only a week later we were in China at the Beijing Hotel. Once again we encountered a wedding. This time it was one not in our Western style white but in the colorful dress of China. But again the same thing was apparent - there was that same attention to detail and it was clear that only the best would do.

The characteristic of the feast at the wedding is that it is an extraordinary event. And what the story of Jesus turning the water into wine seems to tell us is that what is ordinary is made extraordinary. The water that is made into wine is the sign of the extraordinary nature of this new life. A writer says of this miracle: "the water saw its God and blushed." In this new kingdom our ordinary life is no longer ordinary. Each one of us thinks of daily life as being only a matter of one thing after the other, but in the kingdom our ordinary life is no longer ordinary. Every smile given to a friend or a stranger is extraordinary. Every act of forgiveness when one has been hurt, every deed of kindness, every gesture of help, every act of love and every show of concern is the turning of the ordinary into the extraordinary. It should be that every event in our lives is such that when we do it we are aware that our act of concern, or forgiveness, sees God and blushes – the ordinary is turned into the extraordinary. Isn't that the story of that last supper? It was just a meal of bread and wine, but it was made into a lasting memorial of a death and resurrection.

Could we but look at our lives in this way – that we have the power to turn the ordinary into the extraordinary by our love and our caring. This surely is the message of our being a part of the kingdom; this is what it means to be part of the loving people of God. This is what it means to have seen and accepted the forgiveness and the love that God has extended to us.

Thirdly, this story is about a new start. This is the most important thing about a wedding. It signals a new beginning for two people launched into a new life together. The life will not be easy or necessarily smooth, but if it is governed by love and mutual respect it will be a life full of wonder and adventure together. A life of

discovery and a life in which two people begin to see and understand each other as children of a common God. In our communion with each other we recognize what is the meaning of our communion with God. For God comes to us as a person who cares for us and who respects our individuality. The new life together is a new beginning also in that it is the start of a new family – a new union, a new life of togetherness.

This surely foreshadows what Jesus brings to us with his life and his agony on the Cross – he brings to us a new covenant. It is a new agreement that God has made with us, an agreement that is a covenant of love and forgiveness. God's love is ours would we but recognize it there upon the Cross. God's gift is ours if we but recognize it in the new life given in the resurrection. Just as two people start anew in their lives together after marriage, so we begin our lives anew with this new gift of God to us. In our being with him in our lives we look ahead to a new life together, a life filled with extraordinary things, making each moment of our lives different and fulfilling.

We come together, as in a marriage feast, with joy and with hope that this new life will be one in which there will be fulfillment and joy.

John S. Morris, January 2010