The Wedding at Cana

John 2: 1-11

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THE Gospel of John unfolds from its Prologue, as the flower unfolds from the seed. All the major themes and symbols of his Gospel are contained there in embryo. As a writer, John is acutely sensitive in a way the Synoptics are less so, to the fact that the Gospel is one single overarching narrative, and that each moment of its revelation in his text, each separate story or discourse, is seamlessly linked into that larger whole. For that reason we too need to be especially sensitive when reading John to the language he uses and to the connections he makes. This makes any bible study of his Gospel at once particularly rich and particularly complex, because you can't read any part of it, however apparently insignificant, except in reference to the whole. That whole is itself rooted in the language and imagery of the Hebrew Scriptures, as indeed are the Synoptics, which adds another layer of potential meaning which needs to be uncovered. As someone used to teaching literature, I have learnt to appreciate the artistry of John, across his own text and in the ways he presents and redefines the sacred discourse of the past. But that artistry is not a decorative veneer, for in it lies the substance of his theology. I hope to persuade you that this is the case by looking carefully at the first four verses of John 2, before concluding with a brief assessment of the story in its fuller theological context.

On the third day. John does not tell us on the third day after what. Perhaps he simply means the third day of the week, or on the third day after what has immediately preceded it. But if you count those days up you find that it should be the fourth, because he has introduced the baptism of Jesus, the calling of the first disciples, and Jesus's encounter with Nathanael in each case with the phrase 'on the next day'. But you don't need much familiarity with the Christian gospel to know to what else the phrase 'on the third day' refers: 'on the third day he rose again'. John is signalling, therefore, that in some mysterious sense his first miracle story, the marriage at Cana, is pointing to the astonishing ending of his gospel, with its accounts of the resurrection appearances to Mary Magdalene, the disciples, Thomas, and then again by the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps you think this is too far-fetched. Then consider what happens in the story which immediately follows the marriage at Cana. John famously displaces the temple-cleansing from its Synoptic place at the start of the Passion narrative to a much earlier point, straight after the marriage at Cana. The Jews' ask him what sign he will show them for his actions. He replies 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up'. Their response is that of the literalists:

'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?' But this literal interpretation of Jesus's words is shown to be misguided, because, John adds, 'he spoke of the temple of his body', and his disciples remembered his words when he was raised from the dead and believed the scripture and what he had said. In other words, *on the third day* points forwards to the next part of the Gospel narrative and to Jesus's misunderstood words about rebuilding the temple in three days during his visit to Jerusalem after performing the sign at Cana. The true meaning of the reference to rebuilding the temple in three days is the Resurrection, which is the moment when the disciples will finally understand what it meant. So whatever else may be meant by the turning of water into wine, the marriage at Cana is introduced in a coded way and needs to be read accordingly, the more so because of its position as the first sign which reveals Christ's glory and leads to belief in him. In that sense the whole of John's gospel needs to be read backwards, from the end. If it begins with a rewriting of the opening words of Genesis, this can only be because the raising of Jesus from the dead at its ending is a new act of creation and redefines the first one. It may even be that John's insistence on the sequence of days until this point in his Gospel is a conscious echo of the days of creation in the Genesis narrative; in which case the marriage at Cana would (if I count correctly) take place on the seventh day, the Sabbath. Quite what the implications of that might be is something I have not yet worked out.

There was a marriage. In many parts of the Old Testament, marriage is used as a symbol for the relationship between God and Israel. One well-known example is the prophet Hosea, who uses his wife's own unfaithfulness as a metaphor for Israel's forsaking of God, of God's continuing love for his wayward bride, and his longing to forgive her and restore her Another comes from the traditional interpretation of the Song of Songs as the love-song between Israel the Bride and God the Bridegroom, which passes into early Christian exegesis as the love-song between Christ and his bride the Church or God and the individual Christian soul. That tradition is already present at the end of the New Testament, where the new Jerusalem descends from heaven like a bride adorned for her husband, and where the Spirit and the Bride look towards the second coming of the Lord. In the synoptic gospels, the marriage feast is used as an image of the kingdom of heaven, in the parable of the wedding-feast (Matthew 22), and of the wise and foolish virgins (Matthew 25). Early in Mark, after Jesus and his disciples are criticised for not fasting, Jesus replies: 'The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day' (2: 19-20). The story of the marriage at Cana also needs to be read against a tradition in which the union of

man and woman in marriage is a symbol of the union of God with his people, and in which wedding feasts are an eschatological sign of the coming kingdom.

At Cana in Galilee. At first sight, the location of the miracle, like its dating, seems unimportant. But once again, when we reach the end of the Gospel we find a significant clue. Among those to whom Jesus reveals himself by the Sea of Tiberias is Nathanael of Cana in Galilee (21: 2). This is the first and only time we learn that he is from there. Again, you may think I am making too much of this. But when you recall what immediately precedes the marriage in Cana, the place from which Nathanael comes, like the day on which it happens, moves from being an incidental detail to one of the building-blocks of the Gospel. The first chapter of John ends, as we have noted, with the encounter of Jesus with Nathanael: Nathanael from Cana, then a wedding at Cana. The nature of that encounter illuminates what will follow, because it centres on the man Jesus calls 'an Israelite in whom there is no guile', who will make his confession of faith and belief for the seemingly trivial reason that Jesus saw him under the fig tree. I've often puzzled about this. As a lover of figs and a grower of fig trees it has always appealed to me. But there may be a solution. Let me refer you to two texts. We are told in I Kings 4: 25 that, under Solomon, Judah and Israel lived in safety, 'all of them under their vines and fig trees'. The same idea is repeated in Micah 4: 4, but as part of the days to come, when the mountain of the Lord's house will be established and 'they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees'. To be under the fig tree is to live in peace and security—a time projected back into the past but also part of the future God has for his faithful people. In Micah that future is one in which all the nations share. Israel recovers her destiny, as a light to draw the nations to God, not as a nation chosen because she is better than anyone else. The true Israelite is one who understands that, and Nathanael is a true Israelite indeed. And although in his account of the temple-cleansing John does not, as all the Synoptics, quote the text about the temple being a house of prayer for all the nations which has been taken over by robbers, the action is clearly intended to restore the temple to its primary purpose, worship, not trade. The marriage at Cana is situated, then, between the encounter of Jesus with Nathanael, who will later be revealed to be from Cana and who is a true Israelite, and the cleansing of the temple for its true purpose, in preparation for what Jesus will later tell the woman of Samaria: of the hour coming when 'true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth' (4: 23), not in any particular hallowed place. The Cana narrative asks similar questions about the nature of true religion, through the transformation of ritual water into wine, by the one who has been sent by the Father to give power to *all* those who receive him and believe in his name to become the children of God, not only those who belong according to the flesh to the chosen people.

And the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the marriage, with his disciples. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine".

This is the first specific reference in the Gospel to Mary. Her role in the Gospel is hinted at in the Prologue: 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. But John is silent on her precise role in the Incarnation of the Word. Nevertheless, the words 'And the mother of Jesus was there' are, despite their air of factual simplicity, profound in their implications.

Wine, like marriage, is another of those biblical symbols rich in meaning. The absence of wine is also suggestive. In Jeremiah 48: 33, a prophecy concerning Moab, gladness and joy are taken away from the fruitful land and the Lord says: 'I have stopped the wine from the wine presses; no one treads them with shouts of joy'. The wine dries up in Joel 1: 10 when the day of the Lord draws near, but will be restored in 2: 24 when the Lord takes pity on his people. Perhaps most telling, because it mentions mothers, is a text from Lamentations, which pictures infants and babes in the ruined streets of Jerusalem: 'They cry to their mothers, "Where is bread and wine?" [...] as their life is poured out on their mothers' bosom' (2: 12). The context is judgmental: the absence of wine is a sign of destruction, destruction brought upon Jerusalem for all her sins. In Lamentations it is the babes who cry out to their mothers for milk which they cannot provide; in John it is Mary who comes to her Son with the information that the wine has run out. She does not ask him to do anything; she simply informs him, as if she knows that he will intervene to save the day. Some scholars have pointed out that it was customary for the women to stay in the background and do the catering at weddings, whereas the men sat down and did the eating and drinking (typical!). This would help to explain the nature of Mary's intervention. She knows what is going on because she is involved in the kitchen.

And Jesus said to her, 'O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come.' Jesus's response seems curt, if not rude. The NEB translates here 'Your concern, mother, is not mine', and scholars have noted that the Greek word translated 'woman' is the correct form of address to a mother, so does not have the dismissive sense 'woman' would now in this context. It isn't clear, either, that the question he asks, *ti emoi kai soi*, is meant to be read as off-hand. A similar answer is given by Jesus right at the end of the Gospel, when Peter asks him by the Sea of Tiberias about the Beloved Disciple: 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?' (21: 22), *ti pros se*. It is also the idiom used by the demons to Jesus in Mark 1: 24 and 5: 7, when they asks what he wants with them. One possible sense is that the question signals a divine mystery: the presence of one who has knowledge and understanding beyond the human. In any case, his question must be considered alongside the statement which follows it.

My hour has not yet come. What is the 'hour' of Jesus? In the language of John it is the time when his true destiny is fulfilled. It is a *leit motiv* running through his Gospel. Here, at the marriage, he uses the word *ora;* at other points he uses the more suggestive *kairos*—not simply the time of day, but God's time and purpose. But John seems to use these words interchangeably. In John 7: 6 and 8 Jesus refuses to go up to the Feast of Tabernacles because his time has not yet come. John himself tells us in 7: 30 that the enemies of Jesus sought to arrest him but could not, because his hour (*ora*) had not yet come, and repeats the statement in 8: 20 when Jesus is teaching in the temple. Move forward to 12: 23 and the tone has changed: 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified'; notice how the hour is now associated with his glorification. In 13: 1, Jesus knows that his hour has come 'to depart out of this world to the Father', adding a further level of meaning: the hour which is his glory is the hour of his death and resurrection. In the Farewell Discourses Jesus speaks of the travails of a mother in labour, who has sorrow until her hour has come (16: 21), and tells his disciples that so their sorrow will be turned into joy. Perhaps, too, he is thinking of his own mother, who will pass through a second labour of grief when he dies but be filled with joy when he is raised to new life. In 16: 32 he tells the disciples that the hour of their scattering has come, and in 17: 1 he prays, saying: 'Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee'.

The 'hour' of Jesus, then, gathers up into itself the whole purpose of his Incarnation, as revealed in the Prologue. When we behold the glory of the only-begotten Son it is to the Cross that we must look; not because the Cross is the end of the story but because his lifting up on the Cross is the means by which he will draw all people to himself. For John, this 'hour' is a single moment which embraces Passion, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension, the revelation of the glory of Christ's kingship. Everything John records in his Gospel points towards it, and the marriage at Cana is the first sign which reveals it.

But it is a mysterious sign, one which Mary herself cannot fully comprehend, let alone the disciples. Even so, she does not react as if her Son's words were in any way critical of her. She simply says to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you' (2: 5), trusting that he can provide. I find myself reflecting here on how Mary is the model of discipleship and of prayer. She is aware of a need and brings it to her Son. He does not give the kind of answer she might have expected. But her trust is unwavering: the servants to whom her words 'Do whatever he tells you' are addressed are not only those at the feast but all his servants through the ages, ourselves included.

These words of Jesus to his mother contain a further pointer to the future. In verse 1 we are told that 'the mother of Jesus was there'. Their brief conversation in vv.3-4 is, as I've tried to show, as allusive as the rest of the story. It suggests that there is a purpose for Jesus which is as yet not fully known, one which the turning of water into wine will disclose in terms of a sign which, if properly understood, is a manifestation of Christ's glory, and calls forth a response of belief. But when the hour of Jesus comes and his glory is finally displayed on the Cross, Mary is likewise there: 'But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene' (19: 26). It is here that another dialogue takes place, involving not only the dying Jesus and his grief-stricken mother, but also his most intimate friend: 'When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!"' (19: 27). Now that his hour has come, the dying son acknowledges his mother's presence and makes her the mother of all those who truly love Jesus. Having spoken these words, Jesus will drink vinegar, sour wine, and give up his life: the purpose of his earthly life has been fulfilled.

As the story of the marriage at Cana unfolds, through John's finely woven tapestry of symbol, sign and allusion, and a narrative technique which connects it back to the Prologue and forwards to the glorification of the Incarnate Word, the meaning of the transformation of water into wine becomes clearer. The account ends in verse 11 with these words: 'This, the first of the signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him.' The manifestation of his glory takes us straight back to the climactic fourteenth verse of the Prologue: 'And we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father'. The response of belief takes us to the corresponding twelfth verse of the Prologue, where 'all who received him, who believed in his name' are given the power to become children of God.

The other characters— the servants, the steward of the feast, the bridegroom—are also participants in the drama of salvation as it is played out across the Bible, since they too are figures endowed with a deep symbolic significance. The six stone jars filled with water for purification rituals perhaps indicate the incompleteness of such rituals: uncleanness may be washed away, but the ritual must be repeated and merely restores the participant to the state he or she was in before. The transformation of this water into wine ushers in the new revelation of God's purpose. The normal custom of serving good wine first then cheaper plonk when everyone is too plastered to notice is reversed: the wine which comes from the transformation and regeneration of Judaism as envisaged by Jesus, in the line of Deuteronomy and the prophets, is better than adherence to the letter of the law and signals the liberating presence of the Messiah.

Clearly, the water and wine also contain sacramental references: baptism purifies the believer of sin in a single act, but it is the Eucharistic feast, the wedding-feast of the Lamb, in which the believer receives wine transformed into the sacrificial and life-giving blood of Christ, which is sustenance through the whole pilgrimage of discipleship and a foretaste of the life of heaven.

What I have tried to show is that a careful and attentive reading of John's language reveals levels of meaning which lift the story from that of a magician who can manipulate elements and impress his audience to that of the Word made flesh, who will give his lifeblood for the sins of the world and, as William Cowper of Olney would put it, 'bring all heaven before our eyes'. His glory is manifested most clearly where the eyes of unbelief see failure and death and from which even his followers shrink and flee, Mary his mother an honourable exception. He will change life as we live it unthinkingly and uncritically to fullness and abundance of life. He will do this because he is the divine Word, dwelling among us, full of grace and truth. And when we read the story of his first sign, as of those which follow, John invites us to behold his glory and to believe.