Water and Wine

Third Sunday of Epiphany in Year B of Mark

Genesis 14:7-20 Psalm 128 Revelation 19:6-10 John 2:1-11

If I were to be offered the chance to direct the film version of the turning of water into wine, I would cast Maureen Lipman as Jesus' mother. She would have just the right way of playing a determined matriarchal figure: they are at a wedding together – and Jesus has all his mates there. Clearly there has been some mess-up with the caterers – perhaps they'd outsourced it to Carilllion. And so Mary digs her son in the ribs in a significant kind of way.

The wine's run out!

You can see the expression on her face; the meaningful raising of the eyebrows as if to say 'now's your chance!' Jesus ignores the hint:

'Its nothing to do with me, mother'

he mutters in an embarrassed way. She's showing him up before his friends. But Mary will have none of this. She won't take a 'no' from her little boy. And so she calls one of waiters over

'Speak to my son. He'll sort it!'

There is no doubt that John has a wonderful down to earth way of telling stories. But John is not a jovial raconteur. He does not repeat this story simply because it happened. John's gospel is very carefully planned with a very definite purpose. In fact he spells it out at the end of his gospel:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

John 20:30-31

John records seven events that he calls 'signs', central to this key message that Jesus is the Messiah. These are

- The turning of water into wine
- The healing of an official's children 4:46
- The healing of a lame man by the Pool at Bethzatha
- · The feeding of the five thousand
- The calming of the storm on the Sea of Galilee
- The healing of a man born blind
- The raising of Lazarus

In the first miracle at Cana, Jesus picks up two images of God that are constant throughout the scriptures: marriage and wine. The image of marriage appears like this in Ezekiel:

I passed by you again and looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness: I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord God, and you became mine.

Ez 16:8

It is also found in Isaiah, Joel and Hosea, often with words of reproach to a nation which has been unfaithful to God. Above all it appears in Song of Songs, a book of poetry which can be read entirely on a human, natural level or on a spiritual level. The idea that God and his people were husband and wife was commonplace in the time of Jesus. And it continues in the New Testament writers. The writer of Revelation uses the image in a visionary way to describe the end of time:

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband.

Rev 21:2

Paul uses the image in a more prosaic and down to earth way:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might

present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.

Eph 5:24

Incidentally, this passage occurs just after Paul has urged wives to obey their husbands, so any man who expects his wife to obey him should remember that the deal is that he is willing to die for her!

Wine, too has a long association with God, or rather the vine from which the wine comes. For example Psalm 80 tells us that God

brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.

verse 9

Today's Psalm manages to combine both images of vine and marriage:

Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children like olive shoots around your table. verse 3

So the message seems to be that if you want to know what it is like to know God, if you want a foretaste of heaven, get married and throw a party!

That is an amazing message for us – and for those outside the church. So often the image of God seen by those outside the church is that of a policeman or a judge. So often that is the image we convey. God is the man in the sky who wants us to stop enjoying ourselves. The message of the scriptures is the exact opposite: to know God is like the joy of marriage or a party.

But perhaps we need to widen this out: not everyone is married and not everyone is a regular party goer. But every person in this church has relationships with other people, some more profound than others. And everyone in this church has things they enjoy doing, pleasures. So if you want to know what God is like, begin there.

There is a deep similarity between a relationship with God and a relationship with another human being. The love that can exists between husband and

wife, man and woman, friend and friend points us to God. There is something even greater than human love. And the love that God has for us points us towards what human love must look like. Jesus makes this clear in the parable of the sheep and the goats:

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

Matthew 25:35

So the parallel between sexuality and spirituality is not a pleasure seeker's charter: it has profound moral implications. It affects all our human relationships.

So that is why Jesus affirms marriage and parties. Both are valuable in their own right; both are valuable because they point us to God. They are sacramental and they give us two of the church's sacraments, marriage and the Eucharist. And what Jesus did was far more than save the bridegroom from a little embarrassment. Marriage rituals were marked by a series of parties, each family entertaining the other in turn. They were serious matters and a failure to honour an obligation could have resulted in court action. Jesus saved the bridegroom from public disgrace and humiliation.

But Jesus' generosity is extravagant. He creates huge amounts of wine and of the best quality. The message is clear. The grace, the generosity of the new covenant has far more to offer than the legalism of the old; and no matter how much we might enjoy marriage and parties, a relationship with God offers even more.

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