

## John 2:1-11

Today we have arguably some Episcopalian's favorite reading: Jesus turns water into wine. Not only does he turn water into wine, we are told that this is his first miracle. There are those who would say that drinking is wrong, and those who have a different view trot out this passage; which is a shame, actually. The writer of this passage was not trying to say that Jesus endorsed the responsible consumption of alcohol. There is a lot more going on here than just wine.

Our reading starts with the phrase, “on the third day.” This probably does not mean Tuesday, the third day of the week, but three days after the end of chapter one. Chapter one ends with the calling of Nathaniel. Philip comes to Nathaniel to tell him about Jesus of Nazareth. Nathaniel replies with one of the great lines of scripture: “Can anything *good* come from Nazareth?” But he comes to Jesus and Jesus tells him that he will see great things. Three days later, we have the wedding feast. The writer of John sees the Crucifixion and Resurrection as the ultimate revelation of Christ. Here at the beginning of the book, we have a mini preview. Christ is sneered at, and three days later he is exalted. Can anything good come from Nazareth? Well, he can turn water into wine. But you will see greater things than this.

Turning from the context of our story to the story itself, the first question to address is one that arises in any of the miracle stories in scripture: did it really happen? The gospel we call John is structured in two major divisions, the Book of Signs and the Book of the Passion. The writer tells the story of Jesus performing a miracle, and then Jesus offers a discourse, followed by commentary or a meditation by the author. The wedding feast at Cana is the first sign. Did Jesus turn 150 gallons of water stored for ceremonial purification into 150 gallons of the finest wine the steward had ever tasted? Sure, why not? He's Jesus. I don't have a problem with the historicity of miraculous events, but to be honest, with the exception of the Resurrection, it doesn't matter to me whether something *really* happened or not.

What is important with this story is not whether the events happened or not, but rather the meaning of the events portrayed. And much meaning has been found through the centuries in this event. In the opening lines to the Episcopal wedding service we read, “our Lord Jesus Christ adorned [marriage] by his presence and first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee.” Scholars also use our Lord's presence at a wedding feast as evidence that Jesus was not an ascetic. He got out and mingled with the people. He wasn't some aloof, holier-than-thou kind of guy. He went to parties and celebrated the joys of life.

Our Lord knew sorrow, but he also knew joy. They are both part of being human. One should not expect to go through life and experience neither. We will have pain, but we will also have happiness. We are not called to forgo the pleasures that life offers, as long as they are not enjoyed at the expense of others. We should not cause another to stumble, but that's another reading, another sermon.

Scholars have also identified the symbolism of Jesus turning the water used for Jewish purification rites into wine as significant. Perhaps the writer of John was trying to make the connection between the blood of the new covenant, which was part of Christian worship by the time John's Gospel was written, and wine. John's telling of the Last Supper omits the other Gospel's narrative of the institution of the Eucharist, but John does talk more about the theological aspects of body and blood within the Book of Signs.

Some have offered the opinion that the writer here is showing the wine of Jesus, later to be seen as his blood of the new covenant, supplanting the purifying water of Judaism. True

cleansing comes from Christ's blood, not merely washing. In John's Last Supper narrative, Jesus washes the disciples' feet, another indication of cleansing by Jesus. It is a point the writer of Hebrew's makes as well. The sacrifices of the high priest every year couldn't really deal with sin in a final way. It is only through Jesus that we are truly saved, truly cleansed.

Another question raised in this story is why did Mary come to Jesus with this problem? There is no indication from the text that Jesus or Mary had any responsibility at this wedding. "What concern is this of you or me?" he asks Mary. There is much speculation about this situation. Some scholars have suggested that perhaps, what with Jesus adding to his entourage, that there were more people at the wedding than had been planned for. But the writer tells us that Jesus and his disciples had been invited.

And what does Jesus mean when he says that his hour has not yet come? Some have taken this episode to mean that Mary has significant influence over her son. Despite Jesus telling her it was not yet time, she goes and tells the servants to do whatever he says to do. Is she subverting Jesus' desire to wait for a more opportune time to reveal himself? Or does she just know her son? Maybe she knows his kind heart couldn't bear the thought of a family friend facing the embarrassment of running out of wine, despite his protestations to the contrary.

How we understand this episode depends upon how we stage it in our minds. Was Mary out of earshot when she spoke to the servants, perhaps looking furtively over her shoulder, hoping her son would do the right thing? Was Jesus upset with Mary for coming to him with this problem; forcing him out of his comfort zone, putting him in the awkward position of having to say, "No?" Does Jesus sigh before telling the servants to fill the stone jars with water? Roll his eyes at his mother's faith in her boy doing the right thing? Is he appeasing her? Or pleasing her? What was the writer of John trying to tell us about Jesus?

Perhaps the one sure thing we can get from the author is that the faith of the disciples was greatly impacted by this event. "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him." Presumably, they were standing there and saw the whole thing. In the context of John's Gospel, this event comes right before Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the Passover, the first of several such trips in John's Gospel. There, Jesus drives the merchants from the Temple. The faith of Jesus' followers is going to be tested right off. Jesus goes from helping out at a wedding to driving folks from the Temple. I'm sure it must have been a little intense for Peter and the boys. Would they be able to, "do whatever he tells them", if it includes overturning tables in the Temple?

It is no less a question for us today. When our Lord tells us to love our enemies, do we? Do we bless those who curse us? Or do we curse right back? Are we loving our neighbors as ourselves? Or do we just look out for ourselves? Even when our Lord isn't asking us to make a big scene, we still balk. Have we seen enough of Jesus to believe in him, to trust him? Or do we need more? What is holding us back from being Christ to the world? Our Lord turned water into wine and set in motion something that would change the world. He turned ritual purification into true cleansing. He turned a wedding feast into a sacrament of his love for his church. He turned a shameful execution as a criminal into salvation for the world. What are we allowing him to turn us into? How are we being transformed? Are we letting him? Or do we think the hour has not yet come for us?

There is a lot going on in this little story of a wedding; more than justification for enjoying a bit of wine from time to time. It is the story of the start of our Lord's signs that he is

the Christ. It is the start of the belief of his disciples. It is the start of our story of transformation as well. It is fun, an intellectual exercise to speculate as to what really happened, what does it really mean. But in the end, what it means is that Jesus is the Christ, the Lord. May we, like his disciples believe in him. In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*