

Water into Wine - the Wedding at Cana

"Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him."

Prayer

It was a warm, sunny morning as we walked up the narrow, busy street, full of enticing shops, towards the red-domed Franciscan church, dedicated to St. Nathaniel-Bartholomew, a presumed native of this small town. This was almost nine years ago on our Holy Land Pilgrimage. We were in Cana of Galilee, just five miles away from Jesus' home town of Nazareth. Known as the "Wedding Church", this simple building is the disputed site of Jesus' first miracle, John uses the word "sign", at the wedding of Cana, where he gloriously turned water into Wine and which we read about only in John's Gospel. It was a wonderful venue to renew marriage vows and pray for our homes and families. After this service, led by Martin Warner, now Bishop of Chichester, we went downstairs to the crypt where one stone Roman jar is displayed to represent one of the six jars which held the purification water at that original wedding in Cana.

Customarily a Jewish wedding in those days would last seven days, so I suppose you would need a lot of wine for the celebrations and it would appear that the bride and groom underestimated the drinking capacity of their guests or perhaps there were gate crashers. Each guest would have been given water from the jars with which to wash their hands and feet in the ceremonial rites of purification. Then the holy ceremony before the shout of "Mazel Tov" meaning "good luck" or "congratulations" after which the celebrations would begin. The guest list at this wedding included the mother of Jesus (John in his gospel never calls her by name), Jesus' disciples and Jesus himself. It is Mary who approaches Jesus to tell him, "They have no wine." Jesus' reply appears rather curt. "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me. My hour has not yet come." Yet such is Mary's confidence in her Son that she goes to the servants and tells them, "Do whatever he tells you." And so Jesus performs his first public act, the first of seven signs in John's Gospel, he turns a whole lot of water into a whole lot of wine. This is the first sign which revealed his glory so that his disciples might believe. Notice how quietly it's done, presumably in the back room with the servants. "Just fill those purification jars to the brim with water and draw some out and take it to the chief steward." Well the chief steward was amazed, but I

wonder how many of the other guests noticed. After all, most of them could have been well gone. Richard Beck paints this picture really well:

"It was getting late
with the warm fuzz
of the wine
well worked into our minds
when the first sign
of the Kingdom of Heaven
occurred
in a back room
with only the paid help
as witnesses
and the quality
of the gift
passing unnoticed
because of our
intoxication."

Wine is symbolic of God's presence in the world. In this first sign of God's presence, Jesus creates a huge amount of wine with a wonderful taste. Six water jars, each holding 20 or 30 gallons are filled to the brim with water. That's the equivalent of 704 or 1056 bottles - some celebration this. And when the chief steward tastes it he's expecting a vin ordinaire and finds a full bodied Rhone red, a classic chateaufeuf du pape. Simply divine! The quantity and the quality of this wine flowing from Jesus' generosity reminds us that God's abundant grace is sufficient for us and that in his grace we can accomplish all things for him and his kingdom.

The beginning of the gospel this morning tells us when the wedding at Cana took place "On the third day." This is a direct reference to the Resurrection. Here we are at an earthly, ordinary event, a wedding, and we are being asked to consider the heavenly - resurrection, victory over death, the ultimate meaning and destiny of life. Why? There's a well known saying, "It's no good being so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly use." Consideration of this miracle turns that saying on its head. It's telling us that we cannot understand how to live in the ordinary, everyday, earthly context unless we live as people

of the third day, as people of the Resurrection. We will understand the meaning of our lives if we place those lives in the context of Christian hope. This sign of turning water into wine reminds us of the Eucharist in which the wine symbolises the Blood of Christ. Listen carefully to the Eucharistic prayer this morning and you will hear a direct reference to this miracle. The bread and wine received by us keeps our feet on the ground, here and now in our earthly lives, whilst also keeping us aware of eternity, living by faith and hope in the Resurrection of the dead.

As much as this miracle might be a foretaste of the great heavenly feast, as much as it might reveal Heaven in the ordinary and the ordinary in Heaven, the miracle of changing water into wine is primarily about change, the transformation which occurs when we ask Jesus into our hearts. The water, with which the jars are filled, represents the old order of Jewish law and custom which Jesus changes into something better, the new wine of the Kingdom of God. This first sign is to be understood in the Light of faith and at the same time bring faith in Jesus. The wine of God's grace changes our hearts to love God and to live for him. Jesus is in the business of changing water into wine, sinners into saints, fear into courage, sorrow into joy, despair into hope, death into life. And this wine of God's grace he gives super abundantly. As ordinary, inadequate things of water and wine are turned into the abundance of god's grace, so we are transformed into the Body of Christ, the Community of faith that lives on earth, transfigured by the glory of heaven. He came that we might have Life, and have it in all its abundance.

So, on a celebratory note, as befits a wedding, I give us a toast:

"May we not lack for water; And may that water smack of Cana's wine."

Bill Pattinson

24.01.2017