

Homily for Epiphany 2C
S. Stephen's, Providence
January 16, 2022

“But you have kept the good wine until now.”

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

If I had a dollar for every time somebody has made a joke
about me turning water into wine,

I'd have enough money to buy several bottles of very good wine.

Usually, it's because they see my collar, or they know I'm a clergy person,
and I'm in the act of buying wine at the store,
or ordering at the table.

I'm also reminded of an episode of “The Golden Girls”
where Sophia accidentally winds up with Pope's ring
after receiving a blessing at a Papal Mass.

When no one else is around, she puts on the ring,
waves her hand over a glass of water and says “Wine!”
“Eh, it was worth a shot,” she says to herself.

Everyone seems to know about this miracle of Jesus,

of turning water into wine –

it has the status of a parlor trick or a showy sleight of hand.

And yet, the actual occurrence of this event in Scripture

could not be further from that.

It happens quietly and without drawing undue attention.

In fact, this miracle is revealed essentially to only a handful of people,

and of course, to us, the reader or the hearer of the Gospel.

You and I are also disciples,

and so we too are called to behold with the eyes of faith.

In fact, John does not call this event a miracle:

he calls it the first of Jesus's signs that he performs.

These Signs are just that – they signify to us something important

about who Jesus is and what he is doing.

So what is John trying to say here about who Jesus is?

Remember, John is assuming a highly biblically literate audience –

a Jewish people soaked in the language and imagery of the Hebrew bible.

Isaiah, as we heard earlier, foretells of a day of the Lord,

a day of Israel's vindication, when

“You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My delight is in her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a virgin, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”

Weddings are used to convey fulfilment and consummation.

The wedding feast is a symbol for the union of God and God’s people.

The prophets continually describe a God so in love with his people that he is described as a bridegroom, and Israel the bride.

So too, has the Church continued that image,

with Christ the bridegroom and the Church his mystical bride.

So here we have Jesus at a wedding,

with those clear Scriptural overtones

of fulfilment and union and abundance.

In fact, the bridegroom is here –

Jesus, in his own person, being fully human and fully divine,

is in himself the marriage of God and God’s people –

the joining together of God’s divinity and with the humanity of Israel.

Something entirely new is being ushered in.

You get a hint of that new life when John subtly begins this story

with the words, “On the third day,”

which already hints at the new life of the Resurrection.

Wine is also used in Scripture to represent the divine life of God.

Isaiah foretells of a day of the Lord and Israel’s salvation

in which there is a rich feast for all peoples,

with well-aged wines strained clear.

The prophet Amos likewise describes a day of the Lord

when the mountains themselves will drip sweet wine.

Wine, which lifts the spirits, represents in a way the divinity of God,

which likewise seeks to lift us up – to raise us up to where he is.

When Mary comes to Jesus and says to him,

“They have no more wine,”

it is almost like a comment on the situation of Israel and humanity.

The clock has run out on the old covenant between God and Israel.

There is no more wine.

Human sinfulness, the tendency to follow our own wants and needs,

our disobedience, and our negligence of God’s ways:

those hold sway over us.

The divine life of God – that good wine – It has run out.

“They are out of wine,” indeed.

Mary, standing for Israel, when she says “They are out of wine,”

gives voice to the cry of the prophets, “How long, O Lord?

When will you come and save us?”

Of course, Mary knows what the rest do not.

They don’t know it, but the new covenant is now walking among them.

Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah

who will cause the hills to drip sweet wine.

And Jesus, being as fully human as he is divine,

ends up like every young man,

needing a prodding from his mother to do what he knows he needs to do.

Despite his response which seems to question whether it is really time,

Mary knowingly says to the stewards, “Do whatever he says.”

What happens next also has a detail we should not overlook:

the water jars that Jesus instructs the stewards to fill are not ordinary jars.

They are large ritual jars used for Jewish rites of purification.

However, as the Eucharistic hymn of Thomas Aquinas goes,

“the newer rite is here.”

Jesus is the inaugural of a new covenant with Israel,
one which will be marked by bread and wine –
a cup of the new covenant, his lifeblood poured out for all.

As we contemplate this first of Jesus’ signs –
this miraculous turning of water into wine,

there are three things I want you to leave with today:

The first is that in the filling of the jugs with ordinary water,
we can see that God requires some cooperation from us.

He asks us, “What do you have?”

These jars, filled up to the brim, represent everything we have to offer.

God desires to transfigure and transform those things,
not erase them or replace them.

God desires to use what we already have –
even those dusty and broken parts of ourselves.

Thomas Aquinas said that “Grace presupposes and perfects nature.”

In essence, we are what we are – imperfect and broken –
and yet God’s grace assumes that.

God's grace is made all the more extravagant (grace-filled?)
in that he takes those same imperfect aspects of us
and uses them to illustrate the depths of his grace –
they become transformed and transfigured – raised to the divine life.
Perhaps it's worth noting here, as St. Augustine did,
that Christ's miracles don't violate nature – they heighten or intensify it.
Ordinary water becomes wine all the time –
it just takes a long time and undergoes a specific process.
Jesus changing water into wine doesn't violate nature –
it intensifies and heightens it.
The second thing I want you to remember today
is the sheer extravagance of this miracle – this sign of who God is.
Each of the water jars holds approximately 30 gallons, and there are 6 jars.
The result of Jesus's transformation
is 180 gallons of the best wine.
180 gallons.
That's enough for each of us here to leave with (24/25 8:00) (3/4 10:00)
gallons of wine for ourselves!

We might be astounded at such lavishness,
but this in fact one of the signs of the Kingdom!
Abundant, generous, lavish, and undeserved goodness.
Such is the measure of God's grace.
Like those jars, it too is full to the brim.
We are invited to come and partake – to taste and see –
just how filled with excess the divine life of God is.
It knows no bounds when it comes to love, forgiveness, mercy,
self-offering, hope, and faith.
It overflows with goodness at every turn.
Perhaps it is worth noting here that Mary the mother of Jesus
is only mentioned twice in John's Gospel.
Here, at Cana – and then later, at the Crucifixion.
At Cana, there is an overflow of divine life in this miraculous wine.
At the Cross, a very different sort of divine life will flow freely,
enough for the sins of the whole world.
Such is God's extravagant abundance.
Lastly, I hope you notice that this act of extravagance happens quietly.

Despite the magic trick nature of this miracle
that people so often allude to in jokes or popular culture,
it is done without notice.

The stewards are only told to fill the jars with water.

No one sees the transformation take place.

Nothing is said, nothing is done.

People are simply amazed at what is brought to their lips and their tongues.

Mary implicitly knows.

Jesus, we can assume, knows.

Aside from these two, despite the presence of hundreds of wedding guests,
only the stewards and the disciples know what has taken place.

It is then, we are told, that the disciples believe.

Speaking from experience,

the most powerful moments of God's grace in my own life

have come that way – quiet, unexpected,

and yet overflowing with a sense of God's goodness.

I wonder if the same might not be true for you, too?

We expect God's saving acts

to come in bold flashes of lightning and thunder,
when so often they come in the quietness of peace.
They come as those unexpected moments of grace
amidst the clamor and confusion of life.

It's a 90 dollar bottle of Barolo wine
just when we'd assumed that all that was left for us
was boxed Franzia.

It's experiencing the richness of everything
when we realize we deserve nothing.

Yet receive it we must.

So come.

Come to the feast.

Come to the wedding banquet.

Come to the marriage feast prepared for you
from the foundation of the world.

Come and taste – taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Come and drink – drink heavily from the divine life of God.

As we will sing in just a short while,

“come into the daylight's splendour,
there with joy thy praises render
unto him whose grace unbounded
hath this wondrous banquet founded.”

Amen.