

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 2 Year C 2019

One of the great joys of my ministry here at All Saints is the opportunity to celebrate more weddings than up 'til now I had been used to. I haven't had to deal with too many bride-zillas. Mostly, it is a great joy to be brought into contact with all these lovely young couples filled with the joy and optimism their love brings. It is a great joy to present to them the Christian understanding of their union. But I think perhaps *we* underestimate the incredible forces *working against* these couples to be married at all, let alone in a church. They need our prayers to sustain them in their life together.

Marriage, of course, is a universal human experience. And, as so often, these *universal* truths can help to speak to us of *eternal* truths. Throughout Scripture, then, the Wedding is a sign used to speak of the union between God and his people. The fullest expression of this we would find in the Song of Solomon or the Song of Songs. This extended love song a celebration of the joyous union that occurs in marriage. But is included in the canon of sacred scripture only because it is read as sign of the union between God and his people. But the prophet Isaiah also draws on this image as seen in the first reading today. '*Like a young man marrying a virgin, so will the one who built you wed you, and as the bridegroom rejoices in his bride, so will your God rejoice in you.*' The remarkable thing here in Isaiah's prophecy is the idea that *the one who built you will marry you*. God the creator – the one who builds us, makes us – will be joined to his creation. Creator and creature mystically united.

Now, the beautiful and finely crafted gospel portion we hear today from John picks up these exact same ideas: the union between creator and creature. It is not accidental that the church places this gospel portion before us in the 'after-glow' of the Christmas season. For, in these past weeks as we have celebrated the mystery at the heart of our faith - of the Word who became flesh, the Incarnate Son of God, Jesus who is Emmanuel, God with us – is, of course, the celebration of the God who is joined to, united to our human nature. The Incarnation nothing less than *a marriage* between divinity and humanity. The central mystery of the Christian faith – of the God who becomes one of us - draws upon this image of marriage; this coming together of an intimate union between God and man. And this is why, the church fathers tell, Jesus associates himself right from the beginning of his public ministry with a wedding; his first sign manifested in the context of a wedding.

Now, Cana, was a pretty small, insignificant town. The wedding Jesus and his mother and his disciples attend is most likely not the wedding of great and noble families. They are most likely poor families from an economically depressed area. And that might go some way to explaining why the wine runs out!... The wine runs out. Now, if a wedding is a powerful, biblical symbol, wine is another one! Isaiah once more speaks of God's holy mountain, on which *a feast of juicy meats and pure, choice wines* is spread out. And in Proverbs we hear of Wisdom – a personification of God – who sets out a great meal, who lays the table, who prepares the meats and mixes the wine. And of course, the Passover meal, the central meal for Israel in which their principal sacred story is told and rehearsed, and which secures Israel in its identity as the people of God. Wine so central to that sacred meal. Wine which accompanies every great celebration, lifts the mind, raises the spirits, and so is evocative of the divine life.

Now the gospel writer John is a great literary master. But he uses symbols in a very *provocative* way. So, when we are told *'the wine has run out'*, it's really John's way of saying Israel is 'running dry'. And that motif, too, coming from a rich biblical background. The problem of infidelity, of forgetfulness, of Israel neglecting its covenant relationship, its union with God is the perennial issue the prophets address. So often the prophets refer to this as adultery. If Israel was supposed to be joined in a special and unique way to its God, then its infidelity and neglect of the relationship was like a cheating spouse. Hosea, in fact, is told to take a prostitute as a wife, as prophetic act and symbol of Israel's infidelity. *Go take a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom.* (It doesn't get more hard-hitting than that in the OT!) But, also, in the back ground to the story of Cana is probably another image from Isaiah, and that of the vineyard: a vineyard over-run, neglected, misused. A broken vineyard which for Isaiah symbolises Israel spurning its union (its marriage) with God. What was supposed to lead to life and festivity had instead become dry, lifeless and resentful.

So, Jesus, who is the marriage of humanity and divinity, comes to a wedding in which the wine has run out. And Mary steps in to intervene. It's the first time Mary is mentioned in the Gospel of John. And significantly she is speaking to Jesus. And what she is addressing is not so much the immediate needs of an embarrassed family. But symbolically speaking her words echo what the great prophets had been addressing for centuries. In effect, the charge of the ancient prophets had been: 'They have no wine.' Or in other words, 'Israel, you're running dry!'

What Mary says here is simply an echo of what the prophets had said again and again, 'How long? How long, O Lord before you intervene? How long before you will act? How long before you will make yourself known? How long before you do something?! Mary here, then is speaking for Isaiah and Hosea and Daniel and Ezekiel and all the rest. She is Israel saying to its Creator, 'when will you restore the life we once enjoyed?'

Now, Jesus seems to hesitate. But Mary, regardless, turns to the waiters, and says, '*Do whatever he tells you.*' Now, this is also the *last* word we hear from Mary in John's gospel, in fact of all the New Testament this is her last word. But again, Mary echoes the prophets: Isaiah, Daniel Hosea, Ezekiel, all of them. Their chorus one in their challenge to Israel: *do whatever he tells you.* Their call *always* one to obedience. Israel becomes lost when they do not obey him. When they don't listen, when they don't obey, that's when they run dry. If they want the life of union with God restored, if they wish their relationship with God to be healed, *they need to listen to him.*

The gospel indicates what the result of that obedience is: life, abundance, celebration! My brothers and sisters, the simple secret to sharing in the abundance of divine life is, *do whatever he tells you...* If we wish to enjoy fullness of life in God, to raise above of the situations that so often crush us, oppress us, leave us impoverished, then listen! *Do whatever he tells you!* And that the remedy to the first sin, the sin of Adam – the cause of the first rupture -. Adam of course saying, *I will do what I want. I will listen to myself.* And that is something, as we all know too painfully, that inflicts us all.

What we suffer personally in a way has also become the pathology of the church of our day. The great fault of the modern church is to have been seduced by the idea that it no longer needed to obey; that it could improve what had been revealed; that it could improve the Word that Christ had entrusted to his apostles. The principle fault of the modern church is a failure to heed Mary's words, 'Do whatever he tells you.' And instead listen to the spirit of the age, listen to your own desires, listen to anything but... And so, leaving us with a church that has sold out on the abundance God offers; a church which in large measures has conducted itself in an adulterous fashion; a church left in so many places with the wine running dry. But too easy though to say it's all a problem 'out there'. Mary's words are an invitation *to us*: to apply ourselves *personally* to the *full* faith, *enthusiastic* practice and *vigorous* disciplines of the church. An alive, vibrant, committed church starts with us! Christ Jesus showing us that the secret to full life the life that come from union with God. It comes by obedience. By listening to him. Amen.