

Sermon Epiphany 2/Ordinary Sunday 2 Year C 2025

On this second Sunday after Epiphany when we have placed before us the account of the Wedding at Cana, it seems most fitting that we are participating in the Melbourne Bridal Expo this weekend for the first time. And it is also fitting that Fr Isuru and Shanalee, married here just a few weeks ago, should be manning the stall this morning. Their smiling faces and the glow of early married life will hopefully do some good at attracting some interest. And photos from their wedding feature on much of the publicity and resources I've put together for the event.

We have not contrived this occurrence. It seems the Wedding Expo always happens about this time of year. And today's Gospel reading – for centuries now – has been the one set for the week after the Baptism of the Lord, or the second Sunday after Epiphany. From very ancient times, three events from the life of our Lord were connected: The Epiphany, the Baptism, and the Wedding at Cana. In some places early on they were in fact all celebrated on the same day. Now, we have spread them out, to give each space to speak on their own terms, if you like.

The connection comes by reckoning all three as 'manifestations.' In other words, in these three key moments from the early part of Jesus' life and ministry, some key aspect of his person and identity is revealed, is shown forth for us. A key truth of the Christian faith is that the truth is not hidden from us. Is not obscured or veiled. Unlike the Gnostics (and others) who have claimed 'true knowledge' is only available to an elite class of believers, orthodox Christian faith holds that the fullness of truth is revealed for all to see in Jesus Christ. And so, in the Epiphany, or the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles (as the feast is properly called) Jesus is revealed as light to the Gentiles. In the Baptism of the Lord, Jesus is revealed as prophet, priest and king, and the beloved of the Father. And at Cana Jesus' divinity is revealed. The One who takes nothing – mere water – and creates abundance. At the end of the gospel text the evangelist is explicit. *Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory.* In some translations, *manifested his glory.*

Now, when we approach the scriptures there is always the immediate sense of the text, the 'plain reading' as some traditions have called it. And this became a key concern of the Protestant Reformers, to try and recover a meaning of scripture that was accessible to all believers. The plain reading is that which is obvious and easy to discern. And so, we can tell the story of the wedding at Cana as something like: Jesus and his friends are invited to a wedding. The wine runs out. Jesus is asked to do something about this embarrassing

situation. And hey presto, he turns water into wine. What a great party trick! That is how most children's bibles approach it. But even more basically we might say: there is an issue. Jesus is called upon to fix it. And he does. And so at one level the gospel today can be read in this way. Simply as a miracle story, though John never uses the word 'miracle'. But he does identify it as the first 'sign'. And because it is identified as 'first' it is given a certain prominence, it signals a certain importance.

The prominence, the importance of this 'sign' is further emphasised by the very context: a wedding. And it is this setting of a wedding that evokes a rich catalogue of meanings. So, yes, the story can be read simply, plainly. But there are a number of key indicators that something more is going on. And not because the evangelist is trying to be clever, or to put hidden meanings, that we the reader has to solve like some sort of puzzle. But it does mean that from the distance of 2000 years we have to try harder to identify the signals. Like so many parts of scripture, there are references the author presumes his readers will pick up on and know. But we don't inhabit the world of the first century evangelist. So we need help to see what may lay past the 'plain reading'. And a good starting point is to presume that nothing in the gospels is incidental. All the details are mentioned for a reason.

And the setting of wedding is certainly chief among the details we ought to take notice of. The image is probably echoing a theme that is prominent in the synoptic Gospels; of the Kingdom of God likened to a wedding banquet; of the call to watchful waiting for the coming of the bridegroom. And as Jesus commences his ministry there is a signal that this wedding banquet anticipates the banquet of eternal life. More than that, the wedding of course speaks of *covenant*. There are all the rich association of marriages and betrothals in the Old Testament, especially of the patriarchs. It is an image the prophets adopt, such as we hear today in the first reading from Isaiah. The prophets proposing the idea of Israel betrothed to its God. Of the unique bond of love God has for his people.

A marriage speaks of intimacy of closeness, of love. And this intimacy between God and his people perhaps given fullest expression in the Song of Songs, that wonderful exchange between a betrothed and their beloved. The evangelist giving us a signal that this is what Jesus in his first sign is inaugurating: a covenant of intimacy and love.

This sign of exuberant love is further expressed through the key symbol at work in this gospel account: water. At the start of this gospel, and at the start of Jesus' ministry, mention of water should bring our minds back to the start of the entire bible, and the Genesis account of creation. The evangelist John has already pointed us in this direction, in the opening verse of his gospel: *in the beginning was the Word*. In this he directly points

us to Genesis! The Word of God, incarnate in Jesus, is the very agent of Creation. Connecting what we hear today, with the opening verses of the Genesis, means that when we hear of the water jars full to the brim, we also hear an echo of the waters of creation. All this to say, that this sign at Cana speaks of a *new* creation. Just as it speaks of a new covenant of love.

There is, then, throughout this account, a striking sense of newness. Of new beginning, of new covenant. Saint Paul of course is quite explicit. He calls the effects of Christ's saving work as a new creation. But the evangelist is making the same point in the gospel today: Christ effects a new creation. At the wedding banquet, after all, there was wine. But it had run out. There were the six jars for the rites of purification – representing the Law, the old covenant. But they are empty. But at Christ's word, and according to his command, the old is made new, the emptiness is made full.

Now, we can approach our Christian life as something like a 'plain reading.' It's helpful. There's nothing 'wrong' with it. Indeed, it's important. We need to make sure the basics are firmly in place before we branch off into more interesting areas. But it is not an accident that in the fourth gospel we hear, *I came that you may have life, and have it to the full*. In other translations, *have it in abundance*. That is what God's desire for us is: abundance of life, fullness of life! The water jars become wine are full to the brim! It is overflowing abundance! A wedding is a celebration of abundance of love, an overflowing love, love that seeks to be shared, to become the ground of life for others. We should be encouraged today by how the gospel reminds us that God can take the ordinary and make it something remarkable. He can take what has become old and empty and make it new.

But our gospel also points us the *start* of Jesus' ministry, to the *first* of his signs. In the early part of this year maybe we could hear this as invitation. For us to consider whether our life of faith has a quality of depth, or whether we are satisfied to just hover on the surface, observing the minimum and keeping to the basics. The gospel is an invitation to consider whether we experience God as a vital, life-giving bond, or whether we have let this relationship become something old and empty? As we consider this wonderful story again, and as we look to the year ahead, let us seek to experience God's overflowing, abundant love. And let us seek what new thing might yet be spoken to us. Amen.