

Epiphany 2 Year C 2022

Don't we all love weddings? So much joy - so many happy expectations - so much optimism - a match made in heaven, I have frequently been told. Of course, it rarely works out like that! We are human, after all. There will be downs as well as ups - one partner might try to dominate the other - for the couple getting married in Cana of Galilee the groom would have expected to be in charge of all things and the bride would have expected to be totally reliant on, and subservient to, her husband (and perhaps his mother). That was the social norm of the place and time. We don't see it that way anymore. There might be money problems, leading to argument, and the children (or lack of them) could be cause for disagreement. All sorts of things. The match might be made in heaven but the day to day living out of the relationship - well, that's another matter.

There was a long prophetic tradition of naming Israel, or sometimes Jerusalem, as the wife of God. This relationship - the marriage between God and Israel (that is Israel the people, not Israel the land) appears in the prophecy of Hosea, as the Northern Kingdom is cast off by God for acting as a harlot, whoring after other gods (Hosea 1-3). It appears again in the

prophecy of Jeremiah, where the fall of Judea to Babylon is described as a family break-up, caused by the wife's infidelity.

" 'As a faithless wife leaves her husband, so you have been faithless to me, O house of Israel' says the Lord" (Jer 3.20). God reluctantly casts off his faithless wife; the divorce causes rupture between God and Judah - the people go into exile. In the Book of Lamentations the people firstly accept their fault, and then shift the blame to God - 'You invited my enemies from all around as if for a day of festival; and on the day of the anger of the Lord no one escaped or survived'. (Lam 2.22). When the book of the prophet Isaiah picks up the theme of Israel as God's faithless wife, a broken nation, God promises to bring her back from Babylon, restore her lost children, and to renew their covenant relationship, confessing 'For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you' (Isa 54.7).

And in today's reading we find the people returned and regathered in Jerusalem, but divided and dis-spirited, still not convinced of the love of God, feeling that he is still indifferent to them. The prophet reminds God of his covenant relationship with his people - 'for Zion's sake I will not keep silent and for

Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn and her salvation like a burning torch'. Some commentators say that this is not the prophet speaking, but God himself, God speaking to the people - hard to tell - but either way, we come to God's promise - 'for as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you'. The marriage covenant is renewed, the wounds healed, the new names given signifying a new beginning. The nation, as God's wife, would experience God's joy in their return to their homeland, their sense of belonging, and their hope of never again being separated from all that was dear to them - this really is a match made in heaven!

And so we come to the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. This is a story we find only in the Gospel of John, and here we seem to have two miracles (at least). There is the obvious one, the extravagant provision of fine wine (in spite of Jesus' initial reluctance - 'what concern it that to you and to me?' - there could be a whole sermon just on that question) - and the other one, which it would be easy to overlook - the miracle of the obedience of the servants.

Women have no status, no authority, in this household and at this feast - and 'the mother of Jesus' (John never gives her a name) - the mother of Jesus is a guest, not a member of the household, and yet there is no argument. 'Do whatever he tells you', she says, and they do! Don't you think that is a miracle? If they had said 'Who are you to tell us what to do?' or even, in today's parlance 'Get lost', this miracle, this sign, as John calls it, might never have happened, Jesus' glory might not have been revealed and the disciples would not have had anything or anyone to believe in. The miracle of obedience - do whatever he tells you - the joyous feast is saved, and the party goes on.

Some people seem to think that obedience to Jesus is about being miserable, about being too holy to be happy, about frowning on enjoyment - certainly the church I grew up in was like that - couldn't go dancing on Saturday evening if you wanted communion on Sunday (which only happened once a quarter, anyway). But Jesus points us to his heavenly Father, a God who loves to hear people rejoicing, celebrating not only their good times but the good times of others - as well as weeping with them in the bad times. Throughout his life and ministry Jesus celebrated people - people getting married, people being healed, people enjoying

meals together, hungry people being fed, proclaiming a God of mercy, peace and joy.

We have been set free from the fear of sin, punishment and death, surely enough reason to celebrate every day with joy and thanksgiving. When we gather here on Sunday we celebrate communion - we don't do communion, or hear communion - we celebrate, all of us. I don't call myself the celebrant, I call myself the president - I preside over the celebration but we all celebrate. Our joy and thanksgiving should be infectious - in the best meaning of that word, more infectious than *omicron*. And just look at the abundance God provides - wonderful wine overflowing, like the disciples at Pentecost, accused of being drunk, when they were full of the Holy Spirit.

In spite of his initial reluctance, Jesus saw that the time had come, the time to turn water into wine, so that God's party, God's wedding feast, could begin - God's new wedding feast for God's new covenant relationship, this time with all people, not just for Israel.

But what hit me hardest as I read this Gospel passage early last week was this - the mother of Jesus tugged on his sleeve and said 'they have no wine'. She saw the dilemma - the need in front

of her, and turned to her son for help. Today, she tugs on our sleeve, and as 'the body of Christ', she turns to us, points to the children of Afghanistan (or Lybia or Sudan or wherever) and says 'they have no food'. Do we say 'what concern is that to me?' or do we respond to her mother's heart? Do we do the Jesus thing and provide in abundance, pouring the love of God over his suffering world, or do we keep the best wine for ourselves? Just because we can't do everything doesn't mean we should do nothing.