

## THE FIRST SIGN

Genesis 14. 17-20

Revelation 19. 6-10

John 2. 1-11

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

The wedding in Cana is the first public event in our Lord's ministry at which something miraculous occurs. St John points out the significance of the miracle to his readers by writing, 'Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him' (2. 11).

This is a private miracle, subdued and quiet. It is not some flashy show of divine power. Only a few people, including the reader, know what actually happened. We are told that Christ was even reluctant to do anything at the event. The persistence of his mother led him to perform what has become one of the most famous of all his miracles.

The problem was that the hosts had run out of wine. The wedding celebration would have ended if there was nothing more to drink. Mary signals the problem to her son and he replies with a sentence that has puzzled scholars. Is it a rebuke? Is it a mild objection? Is our Lord being rude? If so, his mother does not seem to be perturbed by it and tells the servants to do whatever he tells them. She was always a woman of faith who believed in her son.

When Jesus said that his hour had not yet come, he was not mistaken. In the gospel of John, his 'hour' refers to his death, resurrection, and ascension. It was too soon for such wondrous events to occur in Christ's ministry. Yet, he still performs a rather stunning miracle. The stone jars at the wedding would have been huge containers capable of holding twenty to thirty gallons of water each. There were six of them.

After the miracle occurred, there was enough wine for the whole village; and what's more, the wine was of a better quality than that which had been served previously. It is only at the end that we begin to see the meaning of this story and the significance of timing, grace, faith, and glory.

The chief steward made the ironic statement that the good wine had been saved 'until now'. Of course, this is a symbolic way of saying that our Lord is better than what had come before. He is the apex of God's glory. In God's own timing, the Messiah had come. When the guests' throats were becoming parched; when the host was beginning to feel nervous; when there was no recourse but to shut the party down; it is at this point that Jesus quietly intervenes. It may not have been the most convenient time, but because of the need of the guests and the request of Mary, Christ did what had to be done; for that is why he came.

The fact is that our God is responsive to people's needs. He is not aloof to the human plight. His heart is larger than the stone jars. Some people have come to question the divine response to human suffering and have concluded that there is no God. But this quiet miracle at the wedding in Cana belies that conclusion by suggesting that sometimes, God does his work without taking out an ad in the newspaper.

Indeed, as we will discover throughout the New Testament, our Lord does his work in such a fashion that it is often misunderstood and misrepresented. God has in fact responded to human suffering, in the suffering and death of his only Son. Yet some people (perhaps many?) are not satisfied with that response.

Whatever you may think of the story of the wedding at Cana, there is no doubt that it points to the joyous, life-affirming and astonishing graciousness of God. When the wine ran out, our Lord did not say, 'and it's a good thing that it did, too!'

He is no kill-joy. Rather, he used the shortage to give us a first sign about the good news of the gospel, by transforming what might have been very grey water into the most delicious of wines. The good news of the gospel is that in Jesus, we who were under the constraints of the Law are now welcomed into a new covenant of grace.

Faith is also the purpose of this miracle, as it is the purpose of all the miracles that are described in John's gospel. Indeed, faith is the reason why John wrote his gospel in the first place, that all 'may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing...(we) may have life in his name' (20. 31). Faith is not a matter of coercion, but rather *wonder at the miracle of Christ*. We are told that after the miracle in Cana, our Lord's disciples 'believed in him'. So should we; and does our belief in him give us life in his name?

In this quiet miracle, Jesus revealed his glory. But most of the guests present at the wedding did not actually see this glory of heaven. There was no clap of thunder to herald the event. God's glory is not always what humans expect it to be. His glory is not for mere display; rather, his glory is intended to showcase his love and his divine plans for the world. In Christ, the very nature of divine glory is being redefined. It is glory with a purpose and aim, to create and maintain faith.

If we think about it, we see that there is a connection between perceiving God's glory and being a disciple. As Bishop William Temple wrote, 'The (chief steward) of the feast did not know the origin of the wine which he praised. The servants knew and, doubtless, wondered. But only to his disciples was the glory manifest; and they believed on him. They are first called "disciples" at the beginning of this narrative; and by that name they are designated throughout this gospel. It is as learners that we are to think of them, and to take our place amongst them'.

The implication is twofold: first, it is to *disciples* that God's glory is revealed; and second, that his glory is to be revealed in the world *through those who are disciples*.

Can the Church, and we as members of the Church, stay close enough to the learning vocation of disciples, so that we both perceive God's glory and make that glory known to others? If we have to make this glory clear to others, is it clear in us? That glory is like the difference between water that can never wash clean and the best wine that gives joy to the heart and to the community. Is that glorious truth made known to others in us?

The glory of God is to be seen by others within the context of our discipleship and our transformation. If you and I are to be the place where God's glory becomes apparent to the world, we must to be transformed and renewed ourselves.

Amen.