

## SIGNS OF GLORY

Isaiah 62. 1-5

1 Corinthians 12. 1-11

John 2. 1-11

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

There is nothing perhaps more universal in traditional human societies than the celebration of a marriage with a feast, entertainment and the close company of relatives and friends. Wedding banquets are still enjoyed today by people from different cultures, all over the world.

Our appointed gospel passage describes a very significant marriage banquet, one at which our Lord performed his first miracle, or ‘sign’ that revealed his glory. But in order to better understand that story, we need to stop for a moment and consider the image of marriage in the scriptures.<sup>1</sup>

In the Old Testament, the image of marriage is used time and time again to describe the covenant relationship between God and Israel.<sup>2</sup>

The prophet Hosea, quoting God speaking to his people, writes: ‘And I will take you for my wife for ever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord’ (2. 19, 20).

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<sup>1</sup> Right from the very beginning, when God created the first man and woman, he gave them to each other in marriage (Gen 2. 18-24). In marriage man and woman together image the Holy Trinity: ‘So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them’ (Gen 1. 27).

<sup>2</sup> Marriage is also an image of the Eucharist, where Christ becomes ‘one flesh’ with us in the partaking of his Body and Blood. Pope Benedict XVI, in his book *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, says:

‘In the Eucharist a communion takes place that corresponds to the union of man and woman in marriage. Just as they become “one flesh,” so in Communion we all become “one spirit,” one person, with Christ. The spousal mystery, announced in the Old Testament, of the intimate union of God and man takes place in the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, precisely through his Passion and in a very real way’ (see Eph 5. 29-32; 1 Cor 6. 17; Gal 3. 28).

When Israel repeatedly disobeyed the commands of the Lord, the prophet Jeremiah described her as a wayward spouse (3. 1, 2); but in spite of Israel's unfaithfulness, God remained faithful to the covenant he had made with his people (Ez 16. 59-60). Our appointed text from the prophet Isaiah speaks of that day when Israel will be restored, after having been condemned to exile for her unfaithfulness; and the words used by Isaiah refer to a divine marriage: 'and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you' (62. 5).

In the middle of the Bible, we find the Song of Songs, a love poem depicting the beauty and mystery of love in marriage. Through images and metaphors, this poem expresses the mutual love of the Lord and his people, an unbreakable and everlasting courtship and union; one in which 'love is strong as death' (Song 8. 6).

And when we come to the New Testament, we discover that our Lord often refers to himself as a Bridegroom (Mk 2. 18-20); and at the end of the Bible, all of salvation history comes to a climax with the announcement of the 'wedding feast of the Lamb'. In a vision, St John hears these words proclaiming that Christ will wed His Bride, the Church: 'Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude,..., crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready...Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb"' (Rev 19. 6-9).

Throughout the sacred scriptures, the marriage covenant relationship between God and his people is highlighted, and through that relationship, God's glory is revealed. The wedding banquet becomes a symbol of the intimacy and joy of such a relationship.

With the themes of restoration, marriage covenants, wedding banquets and glory in mind, we turn to the gospel text for today. A wedding occurs in Cana of Galilee; our Lord is one of the invited guests; and ordinary water is changed into premium wine. In the story itself, the changing of the water into wine happens almost without notice. And St John, as he relates this story, does not call it a ‘miracle’. Instead, he uses the Greek word for ‘sign’. There are seven signs<sup>3</sup> in John’s Gospel and, in each case, the sign is associated with teaching and demands a response of faith. Significantly, we are told that through this first sign, Jesus revealed his glory and his disciples believed in him. This story has many layers.

The wedding at Cana is about Christ revealing his glory and the response of faith – the same response that God yearned for through the message of the prophets. The people of God never responded properly, so he sent his Son to show them the way. There are six stone water-jars at the wedding, meant for Jewish purification rites. These jars are symbols of the Law and the Torah; and the jars are empty. Our Lord fills them to the brim, and the water immediately becomes the best wine. This is no simple miracle; it is a *sign of God’s glory* and points to the wedding feast of a new age to come. It points to the true restoration of relationships between God and his chosen people, who are to be, in the words of St Paul, the new Israel.<sup>4 5</sup>

It is the discovery of the glory of God that matters; and when we discover the glory of God in Jesus, we do well to respond in faith. Such a response will transform our lives, which will be then filled to the brim with the water of life that comes from Christ.

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<sup>3</sup> Changing water into wine at Cana (John 2. 1-11); healing the royal official’s son in Capernaum (John 4. 46-54); healing the paralytic at Bethesda (John 5. 1-15); feeding the five thousand (John 6. 5-14); Jesus walking on water (John 6. 16-24); healing the man blind from birth (John 9. 1-7); the raising of Lazarus (John 11. 1-45).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Gal 6. 16 ; Rom 9. 6-8; Rom 11. 18-24.

<sup>5</sup> ‘You shall no more be termed Forsaken (in Hebrew, Azubah), and your land shall no more be termed Desolate (in Hebrew, Shemamah); but you shall be called My Delight is in Her (in Hebrew, Hephzibah), and your land Married (in Hebrew, Beulah)’ (Is 62. 4). It is interesting that Hephzibah was also the name of the wife of Hezekiah, King of Judah, a righteous king who led Judah back into a restored relationship with God.

Those of you who come to St Stephen's regularly know that at one point in our celebration of the Eucharist, prior to the Giving of Communion, the priest says, 'Jesus is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. Blessed are those who are called to his supper.'

Most people think that this is a reference to the Eucharistic meal that we are about to share; and on one level, it is. But it is especially a reference to the heavenly banquet that will happen at the end of time, when our Lord will come back and make all things new. It is an invitation to the marriage supper of the Lamb (to use the words of the Book of Revelation). It is an invitation to glimpse *God's glory now*, which is revealed in his Son, so that we can be encouraged on our Christian journey.

The presence of Jesus makes all things new; and his presence renews his Church. That same presence can renew you and me time and time again, even when, like those six stone water jars, we are empty and dry.<sup>6</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> To quote Richard Holloway: 'Renewal in the Church has only occurred when individuals have turned to Jesus and told him, "They have no wine", and been prepared to be the instruments of his transforming power. When that happens, though his glory is manifested only to the few, the Church is rescued from its failure and the wedding feast continues' (*Signs of Glory*, p.15).