

From The Pastor

Renewed in the power and gift of the Incarnation of God in the flesh, we begin the extraordinary life of 'Ordinary Time'. Ordinary time builds the fabric of faith as we work to express in life and relationships all that we celebrate in the high seasons. This in-between time, the six weeks before the season of Lent/Easter, allows us to digest and metabolize the life we have proclaimed in the birth of Jesus. To do that, we have a profoundly rich story of a wedding feast and the abundance of wine.

Although John's gospel has a literal and historical level, it is also expressly symbolic. The story of the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee begins on the 'third day'. Why does John tell us this? Were Jesus and his friends late for the occasion? Was the cultural experience of a week long reception nearly half over? No, in this case there is something more.

The 'third day' is a symbolic sequence rather than three twenty four hour periods. For John, day one implies the beginning, day two the middle, and day three the conclusion or culmination of the event. The wedding feast is about the event of God's creation and its culmination in the presence and activity of his Son. Day one: God creates. Day two: the Son is sent into the world. Day three: the Son is revealed in his power so that we may believe.

This first miracle of Jesus, changing water into wine, signifies we have moved to the 'third day', the final action of God's plan to save us. This final action is the spiritual marriage between the human and the divine. We are not to be separated from God. The coming of the Son and the 'new wine' of his presence reveals the covenant love God has for us.

Notice the role and significance of Mary, the mother of Jesus. As the wedding in Cana symbolizes our marriage with God, Mary becomes the voice for us, the human side of the equation. Mary speaks on behalf of vulnerable and needy humanity. She says to Jesus, 'they have no more wine'. On the surface in the literal sense, they have run out of wine. On the deeper level, Mary is pleading our need and dependence for divine assistance. Wine is an image of vitality and life. Without wine there is no communion or vitality in the human condition. We are in need of the 'wine' that is Jesus who gives life through communion with the Father. In Jesus, we are united in covenant love with the divine One who makes our lives potent and purposeful.

Mary speaks our need to the only One who can satisfy it, and she knows he will. "Do whatever he tells you" she instructs the servants. They listen to Jesus and do as he says. The old covenant of the Jewish law, represented in the six ceremonial water jars, will now become the source of the new covenant of water and the Holy Spirit. The water that cleanses us from sin (baptism) is now made into the wine of the Holy Spirit. Wine is a symbol or sign of the Spirit, who is revealed and given to the world through Jesus.

Beyond the external rubrics of law as seen in the ceremonial washing, the new covenant will be an interior one. The inside of the jars are filled to the brim with water, soon to be made wine. No longer measured by the law of sin, we are known by the Spirit within our hearts. For those with the eyes of faith accepting the Spirit, the inner life will reveal the life and vitality of God given to us in the life of his Son.

This inner reality is available to those willing to look below the surface, beyond the literal and the obvious. The wine steward misses the point and questions the host, 'why have you saved the best wine for now'? He represents all who are unable to look past the literal abundance of wine, failing to see Jesus as the finest wine who has come to establish the final covenant between God and his creation.

Our human inclination is to stay on the surface. We like to see and test what we are getting. We are practical people and we trust what works. It is hard for us to look beyond the obvious, and trust what is hidden and unproven to the eye. Only as people of the Spirit will we learn to trust and reach for more than what is literal and obvious. This becomes an act of faith. Thus, John's concluding line: '...the signs at Cana in Galilee revealed his glory and the disciples began to believe in Him'.

The whole intent of John's gospel is to have us come to faith in Jesus. Notice that John reflects that the disciples *began* to believe in Him. Faith does not come all at once. It is a relationship that matures and evolves with time and experience. This evolution of faith is shown in this reading as one matures and accepts Jesus as the new wine and revelation of God's full plan for salvation. Old covenant water jars now hold the wine of the new covenant that is Jesus. Water turned to wine soon becomes blood; the blood Jesus poured out for our sins. Washed in the water of baptism, we are nourished with the wine of faith in Jesus, and finally purified with the blood of the Lamb on the Cross of redemption.

As with the layers of this powerful reading, we have only begun to know Jesus. There is always more. Like your best friend and the bonds you share, there is always something new to discover and revel in, or simply share. Jesus is like that too. Lord, teach me the next step in knowing and loving you.

Father John Esper