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Wedding Feast at Cana: Magisterium, Saints, Poets

The scene of the wedding at Cana, through texts from the magisterium, saints and poets.

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VOICE OF THE MAGISTERIUM

Let us focus on these two texts. The miracle of Cana seems at first sight to be out of step with the other signs that Jesus performs. What are we supposed to make of the fact that Jesus produces a huge surplus of

wine—about 520 liters—for a private party? We need to look more closely to realize that this is not at all about a private luxury, but about something much greater. The first important detail is the timing. "On the third day there was a marriage at Cana in Galilee" (Jn 2:1). It is not quite clear what previous date this "third day" is related to—which shows all the more plainly that what matters to the Evangelist is precisely the symbolic time reference, which he gives us as a key to understanding the event.

In the Old Testament, the third day is the time for theophany, as, for example, in the central account of the meeting between God and Israel on Sinai: "On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings ... The Lord descended upon it in fire" (Ex 19:16-18). At the same time what we have here is a prefiguring of history's final and

decisive theophany: the Resurrection of Christ on the third day, when God's former encounters with man become his definitive irruption upon earth, when the earth is torn open once and for all and drawn into God's own life. What John is hinting at here, then, is that at Cana God first reveals himself in a way that carries forward the events of the Old Testament, all of which have the character of a promise and are now straining toward their definitive fulfillment....

There is another basic element of the narrative linked to this timing. Jesus says to Mary that his hour has not yet come. On an immediate level, this means that he does not simply act and decide by his own lights, but always in harmony with the Father's will and always in terms of the Father's plan. More particularly, the "hour" designates his "glorification," which brings together his Cross, his Resurrection, and his presence

throughout the world in word and sacrament. Jesus' hour, the hour of his "glory," begins at the moment of the Cross, and its historical setting is the moment when the Passover lambs are slaughtered—it is just then that Jesus, the true lamb, pours out his blood. His hour comes from God, but it is solidly situated in a precise historical context tied to a liturgical date— and just so it is the beginning of the new liturgy in "spirit and truth." When at this juncture Jesus speaks to Mary of his hour, he is connecting the present moment with the mystery of the Cross interpreted as his glorification. This hour is not yet come; that was the first thing that had to be said. And yet Jesus has the power to anticipate this "hour" in a mysterious sign. This stamps the miracle of Cana as an anticipation of the hour, tying the two together intrinsically....

We thus begin to understand the event of Cana. The sign of God is overflowing generosity. We see it in the multiplication of the loaves; we see it again and again—most of all, though, at the center of salvation history, in the fact that he lavishly spends himself for the lowly creature, man. This abundant giving is his "glory." The superabundance of Cana is therefore a sign that God's feast with humanity, his self-giving for men, has begun. The framework of the event, the wedding, thus becomes an image that points beyond itself to the messianic hour: The hour of God's marriage feast with his people has begun in the coming of Jesus. The promise of the last days enters into the Now.

This links the story of Cana with Saint Mark's account of the question posed to Jesus by the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees: Why don't your disciples fast? Jesus

answers: "Can the wedding guests fast so long as the bridegroom is among them?" (Mk 2:8f.). Jesus identifies himself here as the "bridegroom" of God's promised marriage with his people and, by doing so, he mysteriously places his own existence, himself, within the mystery of God. In him, in an unexpected way, God and man become one, become a "marriage," though this marriage—as Jesus subsequently points out—passes through the Cross, through the "taking away" of the bridegroom.

There remain two aspects of the Cana story for us to ponder if we wish in some sense to explore its Christological depth—the self-revelation of Jesus and his "glory" that we encounter in the narrative. Water, set aside for the purpose of ritual purification, is turned into wine, into a sign and a gift of nuptial joy. This brings to light something of

the fulfillment of the Law that is accomplished in Jesus' being and doing.

The Law is not denied, it is not thrust aside. Rather, its inner expectation is brought to fulfillment. Ritual purification in the end is just ritual, a gesture of hope. It remains "water," just as everything man does on his own remains "water" before God. Ritual purification is in the end never sufficient to make man capable of God, to make him really "pure" for God. Water becomes wine. Man's own efforts now encounter the gift of God, who gives himself and thereby creates the feast of joy that can only be instituted by the presence of God and his gift.

from Benedict XVI, "Jesus of Nazareth", vol. 1, pp. 250-253

VOICE OF THE SAINTS

On the third day there was a wedding. What wedding can this be but the joyful marriage of man's salvation, a marriage celebrated by confessing the Trinity or by faith in the resurrection. That is why the marriage took place "on the third day," a reference to the sacred mysteries which this number symbolizes.

Hence, too, we read elsewhere in the Gospel that the return of the younger son, that is, the conversion of the pagans, is marked by song and music and wedding garments.

Like a bridegroom coming from his marriage chamber, our God descended to earth in his Incarnation, in order to be united to his Church which was to be formed of the pagan nations. To her he gave a pledge and a dowry: a pledge when God was united to man; a dowry when he was sacrificed for man's

salvation. The pledge is our present redemption; the dowry, eternal life.

To those who see only with the outward eye, all these events at Cana are strange and wonderful; to those who understand, they are also signs. For, if we look closely, the very water tells us of our rebirth in baptism. One thing is turned into another from within, and in a hidden way a lesser creature is changed into a greater. All this points to the hidden reality of our second birth. There water was suddenly changed; later it will cause a change in man.

By Christ's action in Galilee, then, wine is made, that is, the law withdraws and grace takes its place; the shadows fade and truth becomes present; fleshly realities are coupled with spiritual, and the old covenant with its outward discipline is transformed into the new. For, as the Apostle says: *The old order has*

passed away; now all is new! The water in the jars is not less than it was before, but now begins to be what it had not been; so too the law is not destroyed by Christ's coming, but is made better than it was.

When the wine fails, new wine is served: the wine of the old covenant was good, but the wine of the new is better. The old covenant, which Jews follow, is exhausted by its letter; the new covenant, which belongs to us, has the savor of life and is filled with grace.

Thy *good wine*, that is, good precepts, refers to the law; thus we read: *You shall love your neighbor but hate your enemy*. But the Gospel is a better and a stronger wine: *My command to you is: love your enemies, pray for your persecutors*.

from Faustus of Riez (5th c.), Sermon 5 on the Epiphany

The Lord was invited and came to a wedding. Is it any wonder that he who came to that house for a wedding came to this world for a wedding? ... Therefore he has a bride here whom he has redeemed by his blood and to whom he has given the Holy Spirit as a pledge. He wrested her from enslavement to evil, he died for her sins. He arose again for her justification. Who will offer such great things to his bride? Men may offer some trinket or other from the earth, such as gold, silver, precious stones, horses, slaves, farms or estates. Will any offer his blood? For if he gives his blood to his bride, he will not be alive to take her as his wife. But the Lord, dying free of anxiety, gave his blood for her in order that when he arose, he might have her whom he had already joined to himself in the womb of the Virgin. For the Word was the bridegroom, and human flesh was the bride.

from St. Augustine, "Tractates on the Gospel of John," 8.4.1-3

The Gospel passages about our Lady show her as the Mother of Jesus, following her Son step by step, playing a part in his redemptive mission, rejoicing and suffering with him, loving those whom Jesus loves, looking after all those around her with maternal care.

Just think, for example, of the marriage at Cana. Our Lady was a guest at one of those noisy country weddings attended by crowds of people from many different villages. But she was the only one who noticed the wine was running out. Don't these scenes from Christ's life seem familiar to us? The greatness of God lives at the level of ordinary things. It is natural for a woman, a housewife, to notice something was lacking, to look after the little things

which make life pleasant. And that is how Mary acted.

Notice also that it is John who tells the story of Cana. He is the only evangelist who has recorded this example of our mother's concern for us. St John wants us to remember that Mary was present at the beginning of the public life of our Lord. He alone has appreciated the importance of that fact. Jesus knew to whom he was entrusting his Mother — to a disciple who had learned to understand and love her as his own mother.

from St. Josemaria, "Christ is Passing By," no. 141

VOICE OF THE POETS

Our Lady's Salutation

Spell "Eva" back and "Ave" shall you find,

The first began, the last reversed our
harms;

An angel's witching words did Eva
blind,

An angel's "Ave" disenchant the
charms.

Death first by woman's weakness
entered in;

In woman's virtue life doth now
begin.

O Virgin's breast, the heavens to thee
incline,

In thee they joy and sovereign they
agnize;

Too mean their glory is to match with
thine,

Whose chaste receipt God more than
heaven did prize.

Hail, fairest heaven, that heaven and
earth do bless,

Where virtue's star, God's sun of
justice, is.

With haughty mind to godhead man
aspired,

And was by pride from place of
pleasure chased;

With loving mind our manhood God
desired,

And us by love in greater pleasure
placed.

Man, labouring to ascend, procured
our fall;

God, yielding to descend, cut off our
thrall.

by St. Robert Southwell (1561-1595)

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