

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Lectionary C, John 2:1-11

Trinity Church, January 20, 2019

Today we have heard from the Gospel of John the account of a wedding in Cana of Galilee. This is understood to be Jesus' first miracle when he turned water into wine – and not just a little wine -- anywhere from 120 gallons to 180. This, of course, is comforting for many Episcopalians who enjoy wine. We point this out to those who think it is a sin to drink anything alcoholic. But their rebuttal can be that it was actually grape juice that he made because the juice didn't have time to ferment. Nevertheless, it is a remarkable story that leaves us wondering what the point of it was. Could it be that Jesus was just showing off that he could perform miracles? Why did he snub his mother and yet go on to fix the chief steward's problem of running out of wine at the wedding feast?

It is likely that most people just take this story as a miracle since it is set in that context. But scholars are well aware that John's Gospel is the most mystical of the four gospels. Rather than giving an inaugural address as in the synoptics, John gives an inaugural scene – an inaugural

deed. If we think of it as an actual miracle we not only wonder why he did it, but wonder if such a thing could really happen. Marcus Borg notes that if we do this we can easily be distracted and miss the point. The meaning of the story is not to show Jesus as a miracle worker. “Instead, it is a ‘sign’ as John puts it. Signs point beyond themselves; to us a play on words, they “sign-ify” something, and what they signify is their significance.” (Reading the Bible Again for the First Time)

A number of details have caught the attention of scholars, such as the odd exchange between Jesus and his mother, and that the water used was “for the Jewish rites of purification”, which in the story is the anticipation of Jesus’ death. But the primary symbolic feature of the text is that it is a wedding banquet.

Wedding banquets commonly lasted seven days. It was a time when people who were for most part poor splurged on food and drink. By using the scene of a wedding banquet, John is saying that the gospel is the good news about Jesus. Jesus message is about a “wedding banquet at which the wine never runs out and the best is saved for last.” (M. Borg) The metaphor of a wedding banquet has also been used for the relationship between God and Israel. In the New

Testament Jesus is “sometimes spoken of as the bridegroom and the community of his followers as the bride.” “A wedding could thus symbolize the intimacy of the divine-human relationship and the marriage between heaven and earth.” (M. Borg)

In this story when Jesus says to his mother, “It’s not my time,” is probably a reference to a later time when Jesus was glorified (12:23, 27-28), elevated (3:14), and hence ready to return to the Father (13:1; 17:1) “When the time comes, Jesus will speak plainly (16:25) and the disciples will be scattered (16:32); then the true worshippers will worship the Father as he truly is, without regard to place.” (4:21, 23) (Jesus Scholars, The Five Gospels)

One could spend a lot of time studying the meaning of this scene and its relationship to Jesus’ life. What we can take from the story is the belief that Jesus embodied a “new age” symbolized by the good wine that he had created.

John’s gospel was the last to be written, probably at the end of the first century. Many of the words placed on Jesus’ lips are not meant to be understood as Jesus’ actual words, but of the faith and experience of those who had received the tradition of Jesus and who were experiencing in a mystical way the divine presence of Christ in their lives.

They were already separated from a verbatim account of Jesus' words and life by more than 50 years. Although they lived close to the time of Jesus' life on earth, they entered into a mystical relationship with Christ just as we do in our own time. They had the same motivation as we do to discover where the human spirit meets the Spirit of God. They discovered this unity through their relationship with the resurrected Christ. The meaning of the stories may not be found by believing that they actually happened, but rather in the symbolic language that points to the nature of Jesus and his relationship with his heavenly Father.

That, of course, is what we do centuries later. The mystical truth of the story becomes a part of our own mystical relationship with the Spirit. Like a good novel, the meaning of the story is not to make the actions of the characters historic facts, but to see in the story a deep meaning true to life and perhaps true to the experience of those who delve into a divine relationship. Sometimes stories convey the truth better than if they were the facts.