

The Wedding at Cana

Sermon at Trinity College Chapel on Sunday of 2nd Week, Hilary Term 2009

The feast we hear about in this story must have been a grand and also a rather colourful event. The wedding Jesus, his family and his disciples attend would have had a large number of thirsty guests, and as it turned out, those who had organised this celebration had seriously underestimated either their number or their thirst. Everyone who has ever been in such a situation will surely appreciate the embarrassment this must have caused. On this occasion, the host clearly was on the lucky side as his stock of wine received a rather unexpected and fairly substantial boost. The paintings many of us will associate with this story usually give a somewhat distorted idea of the magnitude of Jesus' interference with the drinks provision at this party by depicting the stone jars as slightly bigger decanters; in fact, if we follow the gospel story these jars must have been huge each containing between 80 and 120 litres. Filling six of those with wine would have amounted to an extra 100 bottles. If we then take into account that by the time this happened most guests had already consumed a considerable quantity of alcohol, we begin to understand that this must have been a rather jolly night.

As a miracle story the Wedding of Cana is fairly unique in the New Testament. Not because the gospels were overall lacking in accounts depicting miraculous events. On the contrary, they are of course full of them. Yet practically all other miracles Jesus is said to have worked somehow seem to be more directly related to his ministry. When John the Baptist sends his disciples to ask whether Jesus is the promised Messiah, they receive this answer: 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.' Jesus' message, the gospel he preaches is that the Kingdom of God has come, and

we can easily see how the things Jesus is said to have done symbolise the novelty of this situation – the overcoming of illness, suffering, pain, and bereavement, but also the replacement of fear and insecurity by trust and confidence in the nearness and in the loving support of God.

While one may argue that abundance of wine at a wedding feast is also a welcome and indeed very attractive prospect, this nonetheless seems a far cry from the dire need addressed by most of Jesus' actions – even the multiplying of bread and fish to feed five thousand who otherwise would have had nothing appears in an altogether different category. By comparison, our story can seem almost trivial – it would be difficult to imagine it added to the catalogue of miracles Jesus reports to John's disciples. Ultimately, Jesus' action at the wedding of Cana seems designed to prove essentially just one point – that Jesus was able to transgress the laws of nature. Accordingly, the story ends by pointing out that this was the first 'sign' he produced to reveal his 'glory'.

Yet the revelation of the 'glory' of Jesus Christ is, for the fourth evangelist, not at all a trivial matter. In many ways the question of how the human existence of Jesus can provide the grounds for belief in him as the saviour is the most fundamental issue addressed in this gospel, which at its very end has the risen Christ say to Thomas, 'the doubter', 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' Thomas, we may remember, had refused to believe in Jesus' resurrection while he could not touch his body, but when this is granted to him he is moved to a full confession of Christ's divinity. Yet Jesus' answer seems to imply that there was something wrong with this empirically induced faith.

If the fourth evangelist is thus critical about faith on the basis of miraculous evidence, why does his gospel contain a number of miracle stories? The

close resemblance of the Wedding at Cana to pagan epiphany stories, especially those about Dionysus, is striking and was certainly noted by the early Church which dated the Wedding of Cana to coincide with the feast of this popular god, yet this similarity should not blind us to the fundamental difference between these stories. The signs Jesus produces reveal his glory *in the flesh*. He does not turn out to be a deity who had merely assumed human form, but he is the Word that has become flesh, and the story the fourth evangelist narrates seeks to give evidence of the paradoxical revelation of his glory during the time of his Incarnation. The signs he produces are not, therefore, meant to deflect from his human existence, which leads ultimately to his death on the cross. Characteristically, the passion is in itself a sign revealing Jesus' true nature to all those who are able to see it; his glorification is evident even and especially in the moment of his deepest abasement.

The miracles the fourth evangelist recounts are thus 'signs', pointers to Jesus' true identity, which, the evangelist believes, is key for an understanding of his ministry. What kind of sign, then, is the transformation of water into wine at the Wedding of Cana? I think it is relevant that it shows Jesus in the middle of normal human life. He, together with his friends and family, takes part in a wedding, and it is there – not in the course of any extraordinary religious, spiritual or even ascetic activity – that his special nature becomes evident for the first time.

Christianity has frequently been accused of being a life-denying religion, hostile to jocundity and the pleasures of life. While it is difficult to deny that Christian religiosity over the centuries has time and again been characterised by such features, it may be worthwhile to reflect on the fact that here, right at the beginning of the gospel of John, Jesus is said to have helped a wedding party to more wine. Elsewhere, in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says about himself that since he came along 'eating and drinking' he

was accused of being 'a glutton and a drunkard'. Jesus believed the kingdom of God had already come, and there was therefore reason for celebration. All the gospels are full of accounts about his participation in meals and in feasts, famously including those he held with tax collectors or prostitutes.

The coming of the kingdom, which justifies the feasting, cannot, however, be detached from the person of Jesus; the kingdom is there because he is there. It is for this reason that his participation in those activities reveals his special nature, his glory, as we have heard it in our text. Yet the conjunction of Jesus' coming and the justification of feasting and celebration is only visible to faith – to those who lack it, it must (and it did) seem objectionable or even obscene. Perhaps the Church, where it has been hostile to festivities, has actually lacked in faith.