

Epiphany 2 C

The Wedding Feast at Cana: Disorganized Ruminations

John 2:1-11

If you examine earlier English translations of this lesson, (The Revised Standard, The Authorized (King James) Version, The New American Standard Version), you find that the guests didn't "become drunk" at the wedding party. That was just a little too irreligious to find its way into a story about Jesus to be read in all those teetotaling churches of the later 19th and earlier 20th centuries. In fact, one has to go back to the Cranmer translation of 1539 before you read that anyone is drunk at the Cana wedding. But the New Revised Standard picks up the implication of the Greek text and says, that, at a party at which the guests were drinking a lot of wine (They did run out part way through!) and which lasted for several days, the likelihood is that they were at least happy.

That's a side light on the text, part of a story about the story itself. It illustrates the freeing of the Biblical text from stained glass attitudes. I want to spend time looking at a couple of other odd sidelights to this text. Return to our first hymn, *Sing of God made manifest*. You won't find this hymn in our hymnal. It comes from the hymnal of the Anglican Church of Canada, and the text is by one of the best of 20th century text writers, Carl Daw. The first verse deals with the wise men coming to see Jesus. That's the lesson read on Epiphany Day, and it has been read every Epiphany Day for over 1500 years. Like most things having to do with worship, and its customs, practices, and theologies, it just emerges from the historical mist. We know it was used early because people mention it offhandedly when speaking of something else. Why bother to record something everyone knows about and that doesn't have anything to do with a church fight? The study of early liturgy is frequently dependent on the off-hand remark.

The second verse, "Sing of God made manifest when at Jordan John confessed, "I should be baptized by you, but your bidding I will do." In the ancient church, that lesson was read on the First Sunday after Epiphany. On the Second Sunday after Epiphany they read the story we read today. This sequence of readings has been used for over 1500 years.

That's sidelight two. It illustrates tradition and continuity, but in a place where we might not have thought to look for it.

Look at the last verse, "Sing of God made manifest on the cloud-capped mountain's crest . . ." Clearly, it's a verse about the Transfiguration. Transfiguration stories are always read on the final Sunday of Epiphany Season, no matter how many Sundays there are or aren't in the season. The last Sunday in Epiphany is always the Sunday of the Transfiguration.

This hymn takes us from the beginning to the end of Epiphany Season and devotes one verse to each Sunday's theme.

Verse three is a kind of catch all verse. Like a vacuum cleaner it pulls in everything between the Wedding at Cana and the Transfiguration. In the second half of the third verse we read: ". . . further still was love revealed as he taught, forgave and healed, bringing light and life to all . . ." This summarizes the Gospels assigned for the rest of the Sundays of Epiphany.

The theme of Epiphany Season is the manifestation of Christ through his ministry; in other

words, our ability to know Christ by remembering his actions. That's clearly what the second half of the third verse is about. In this hymn we have a summary of the different Sunday Gospel themes of the Epiphany Season. You might want to file that away in the back of your mind, because there are four or five standard Epiphany Hymns which have the same structure, one verse of the hymn to the lesson theme of each Sunday of the season. It is almost common enough to be a literary genre.

Comment: In fact, we're going to do another one today, Hymn 132 (*Hymnal 1982*, *When Christ's appearing was made known . . .*).

Ok. Thanks. So, look for these themes in Hymn 132: The wise men (Lesson on Epiphany Day), the baptism of Jesus by John (The First Sunday following the Epiphany), and the wedding at Cana (The Second Sunday of Epiphany).

So ends piece two of liturgical trivia for this morning.

Now, a third piece of liturgical trivia: The collect for this Sunday, the Second Sunday after Epiphany, doesn't mention the Gospel lesson. It doesn't mention the wedding at Cana. It does say, "Almighty God, whose son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world: Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory. . ." The collect and Gospel come together because the Wedding at Cana is a blessing of the material world, a relating of the material world to God. That is the function of all sacraments: Eucharist, Baptism, Confirmation, Marriage, Holy Orders, Unction (Healing). Every sacrament uses a material substance in the worship of God, and in each sacrament, God's glory is manifested through material reality. God's presence is expressed by means of the material world, and he is known through the material world. It is a mistake to think that in being spiritual one has to escape the material. To be spiritual means to relate things to God, not leave them in isolated unrelatedness. In the sacraments we use matter as a means to relate human existence to God. Think about the stories: Water into wine, feeding the five thousand, Jesus placing his hands on people to heal them, these are stories of matter: wine, bread, hands. To touch is a material gesture, a movement in the world of matter. Jesus, if you read the Gospels carefully, did a lot of touching. When he raised the son of the widow at Nain, the Gospel is clear: He laid his hand upon the bier. He didn't stand back, fold his hands and say words at a distance. There was always a sense of intimacy, a sense of physical presence. This is a constant struggle in Christianity, to remember that the material world is holy. For a long time Christianity forgot its own origins and people would pooh-pooh the material world, saying, "After all, we're going to heaven. We'll leave all that behind."

Here's the problem. Love, which, if I read my Gospel correctly, is what it's all about, demands a sign. It demands a means of expression. It's not like the song from *Oklahoma!* (*Pore Jud is Daid*) in which the preacher is trying desperately to find something nice to say about him, finally settling on the idea that Jud loved everyone, but never let anyone know. The problem with this, and the origin of the song's rather sardonic humor, is that love unexpressed is love atrophied or love imagined rather than realized. Somehow it needs to be expressed even if the expression is as minor as a self-conscious calling to mind. Usually love needs some kind of physical assistance to be fully expressed. I would go so far as to turn the somewhat traditional Christian picture of this inside out. Love expressed by means of the physical world tends to be a greater, a more adequate love than a merely spiritual love. The more of the creation of God we use in witnessing to God, the more adequate the witness. The reason why human beings in traditional Christian theology are as high as

angels, is that we do what angelic beings cannot do: we use matter to express love. That may be stated in mythological language, but it encompasses a big point.

This collect connects to the Cana wedding story: God was manifested in the material world. If we are illumined by words and sacrament, that's what we end up doing; expressing God in and through the material world as Christ expressed God in and through changing water into wine in order that the celebration could continue.

One more point about this collect. Many collects have result clauses, that is to say a statement about the good which will happen if the petition of the collect is granted. In this one, the result clause is that he, meaning Christ, ". . . may be known, worshiped and obeyed to the ends of the earth." It is an error commonly made in our thinking to substitute the word "church" for the word "Christ." The collect is then read and theology is created: "grant that your people, illumined by our word and sacrament, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that the church may be known worshiped and obeyed to the ends of the earth." That changes the collect's meaning significantly.

The question is: since it seems quiet clear that God expresses himself in the Great Andromeda Nebula, in which, so far as I'm aware, the Christian community has not yet established a mission post, what is the church's task in contrast to our Lord's task? The church's job is to witness to God, to practice the presence of God, to do what we can to model God's love, first for each other and then for the world. By the way, since I'm complaining this morning, we sometimes get the order backwards and think we need to model God to the world first, and after we've done that, we model love for each other in the church. We need to learn how to care for each other and while we practice that in the church, try it out occasionally on the world. I guarantee you, if we cannot make the love of Christ manifest inside the church, we've got no business proclaiming it outside these walls.

So, an important warning: Don't confuse Christ and the church. We are the signpost that points; we are not the goal of the journey.

That brings me to the theme of the Epiphany season and a reason why hymns are written with one verse to each biblical theme of the season. Epiphany is the season that celebrates how Christ became and becomes known. He became known in one way at the marriage at Cana, in a slightly different way at his baptism, in a slightly different way on the Mount of Transfiguration. He becomes known as each of these events is reflected on and re-experienced today. In slightly different ways each Sunday Christ becomes known through the day's lessons. What we're to pay attention to during the season are the different ways in which Christ becomes known. That's the function of the season in the church's year, to proclaim the revealing variety in Christ's ministry. How is Christ to become known?

Ok. That's enough of that. A little "lecturey" this morning, but it doesn't hurt you occasionally.