

The Gospel Reading at the Marriage Service: A hermeneutical approach. (Ioannis Karavidopoulos, Professor of the School of Theology of the University of Thessaloniki)

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The Gospel extract which is read at the sacrament of marriage is John 2, 1-11 (the miracle of the transformation of water into wine). Why did the Church choose this particular excerpt, when the Gospels have preserved numerous discussions involving Christ on marriage, particularly its indissolubility, such as, for example the discussion with the Pharisees (Matth. 19, 1-12; Mk. 10, 1-12), where we have a reference to Genesis 2, 24: 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'; and also to the words of Christ in the same discussion: 'so that they will no longer be two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no-one separate'. This excerpt is, in

fact mentioned in some of the more ancient selections of readings.

I think that the holy Fathers, who always did things for the best, avoided linking the sacrament of holy matrimony with excerpts containing words of Christ on the subject of adultery (such as those mentioned above) or indeed any disturbance of marriage, and preferred Jn 2, 1-11, where there is talk of joy and happiness, of the presence of Christ and His disciples, at the wedding in Cana, which His mother was also attending. Obviously this choice is supposed to have some meaning for us. In interpreting Jn. 2 1-11, the Fathers note that, not only is Christ present at the wedding with His disciples (and probably His brethren), perhaps participating in the seven days of feasting, but that He also made a gift to the bride and groom, in accordance with custom. And this gift was good wine. That's the essential theological point of this reading, as we'll see hereafter in this hermeneutical approach we're attempting.



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Taking reading out of their context so that they can be read at a sacrament or service creates certain problems of interpretation. Here, for example, as regards the whole architectonics of the Gospel according to Saint John, the miracle in Cana marks the beginning of the 'signs' of Jesus and the manifestation of His glory. The transformation of the water into wine is associated with the new beginning made by the Messiah in replacing the old worship, linked to the water of purification and sacrifices, with the wine of the divine Eucharist. But when the reading is isolated from the Johannine context and is applied to the sacrament of matrimony, without

the rest of the background, the weight falls mainly on the presence of Christ at the wedding, rather than on the miracle. Though we shall see that the transformation of the water into wine can also be associated with marriage.

It's not irrelevant or outside the agenda of this conference for us to dwell for a little on the crux of this reading, without, of course, going into great detail, since this would take us beyond our scope.

This is the much-discussed 'What is that to me, woman? My hour has not yet come'. The prevalent Patristic interpretation of the first part of the quote (with the question mark) is Christ's declaration to His mother that His divine mission, determined by the will of His Father Who is in heaven, has nothing to do with the human initiative of His mother or with any feelings on His own part. And yet, He goes ahead and performs the miracle, showing respect and honour to His mother, as Saint John Chrysostom says: 'so that no-one could gainsay her glory, so that she could not acquire glory in some feeble manner, so that she, who bore Him, would not be ashamed before so many other people' (PG 59, 134).

The view of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Theodoros of Mopsouestia, Efraim the Syrian and some contemporary commentators is that 'My hour has not yet come' should be read as a question: 'Has my hour still not come?'. This would make the text more reasonable and effect a better transition to the next verse where His mother appears to understand His observation positively and turns to the servants and says: 'Just do what he says'. But this diminishes the very real tension between the 'hour' of Christ, which is determined by God the Father, and the human intervention of His mother. It may be that Jesus responds to her indirect appeal, but she, as a person, has to recognize that the fundamental and redemptive events of His life are determined by the will of His Father in heaven.

A reading of the excerpt on a theological level, in relation to the old and new dispensation of God in Christ leads us to the following interpretation.

(to be continued)

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