

The First of His Miracles (Fr. Lawrence R. Farley)

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The Wedding at Cana

In the Gospel of John, we read that Christ attended a wedding in Cana of Galilee along with His disciples, and that His Mother was there too. When the wine gave out, she asked Him to do a public miracle, openly manifesting to all that He was the Messiah. He refused, calling her rather formally “Madam” rather than the usual “Mother” (the Greek reads, *gynē*, “woman”, but this has a different and more disrespectful feel in English than it does in the original), and asking what this problem had to do with them. “My hour,” He explained, “has not yet come.” She responded by telling the waiters serving the wedding feast, “Whatever He says to you, do it.” Thereupon Christ had the waiters fill to the brim six large stone waterpots and take them to the headwaiter. When the waterpots arrived at their destination, the headwaiter discovered they were now full of wine, but he had no idea from where the wine had come. And this was not just any wine—it was good wine, better than the stuff that had been served before this. John commented, “This first of His miracles Jesus did in Cana of Galilee and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.” The whole story can be found in Jn. 2:1-11. The Church loves this story, and reads it as the Gospel at every wedding service. I would like to examine this very first of His miracles to see what this story reveals to us today.

Firstly, it reveals the essence of discipleship and faith. Christ’s Mother knew that He was the Messiah. How could she not, when the archangel Gabriel told her so at the Annunciation of His conception? She knew that He had been following His kinsman, John the Baptizer, and that John had identified Him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29f). Surely now was the time for Him to publicly proclaim that He was the Messiah? This is what Mary was requesting—not just a miracle, but a *public* miracle, one proclaiming that He was the Christ, the One sent to redeem Israel.

As we see from Jesus’ enigmatic reply to her, she was mistaken in thinking that now was the time for such public proclamation. In fact throughout His ministry, He remained resolute in His refusal to promote Himself as the Christ. When the demons involuntarily cried out that He was the Messiah, He refused to let them speak (see Mk. 1:34). His preferred self-designation was “the Son of Man”, a title that carried fewer overtones of militarism than did the title “Messiah” or Christ. Everyone in Israel expected the Messiah to be a military leader, a King who would raise an army, and make war on the Romans, and liberate the state of Israel, making them rulers in the world. Such a public proclamation of Messiahship at this time would’ve spelled disaster, and invited reprisals from the Romans before the appointed time. As Jesus told His Mother, that “hour” for public proclamation had

“not yet come”. The hour of His public exaltation as Messiah would be when He was on the Cross (see Jn. 12:23-33). For now, His glory must be veiled in the humility of a Son of Man who had nowhere to lay His head. Now was not the time for Jesus to proclaim Himself as the Messiah.

That was why Jesus did not do what Mary asked Him to do. In calling her not “Mother”, but rather “Madam”, He was distancing Himself from her previous maternal authority over Him. As a child, He remained subject to her authority, and that of Joseph (Lk. 2:51), and did what He was told. That time was coming to an end, and He now remained subject only to the will of His heavenly Father. It was time now for *her* to become subject to *Him*, time for the holy Virgin to become His obedient disciple—and Mary instantly accepted His direction. The Theotokos, the humble girl who always did the will of God and who bowed her holy head before the angel’s *evangelismos*, saying, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word”, now continued in her obedience to the divine will, and became the disciple of her Son. Her only word was one of submission to her Son; she told the waiters, “Whatever He says to you, do it.” This is the voice of a disciple, and is her abiding and eternal counsel to us all. This story reveals the humility and sanctity of the Mother of God, Christ’s first and best disciple. It reveals that the essence of faith is humble obedience.

Secondly, this story reveals the difference and the distance between the old and the new, between the water of Judaism and the rich wine of the Kingdom. It is no accident that John tells us that the stone waterpots Christ used were “set there for the Jewish custom of purification” (Jn. 2:6). By this John means us to identify the water with the old ways, with religion and religion’s concern for purification and sacrifice and Temple and priesthood and Law. These things were good, for they were God’s gifts to His ancient covenant people. But as God Himself foretold through His prophets, now He was doing a new thing (see Is. 43:18-19). Before this, His people needed sacrifice and altar and Temple to find saving access to His Presence, but this was changing. Now the hour was coming when neither at Mount Gerizim nor at Mount Zion with its Temple would His people worship Him, but would worship in the Spirit, and in Jesus, the Truth (Jn. 4:21-23). Now access to the Father would be through Christ (Jn. 14:6). His body was the true and abiding Temple (Jn. 2:19-21), His Cross the true and abiding Sacrifice. The prophets were right. Israel should not call to mind the former things, or ponder the things of old. Now, through Jesus, God was doing a new thing.

This contrast between the old and the new pervades the Gospel of John. John himself summarized it at the very beginning of his Gospel when he said, “The Law

was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ” (Jn. 1:17). Christ constantly called His hearers’ hearts away from the old and directed them toward the new.



Christ Healing the Paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda

Christ did this when He healed the paralytic by the sheep pool in the Temple. The pool by which the paralytic sat was for John an image of the Law: its five porticoes imaged the five Books of Moses (Jn. 5:2) and the fact that its water was thought to be stirred up by an angel also echoed the Law, which had been given by angels (compare Gal. 3:19, Acts 7:53). The paralyzed man sat helplessly by the pool for a long time, even as Israel sat for many years seeking salvation through its Law (Jn. 5:39). When Christ asked the man if he wished to be healed, the man’s hope and attention was still set on the pool. He had no one to put him into the pool once the water was stirred—could Christ perhaps lift him into the pool at the proper time? Christ called him away from the old and re-directed him towards the new. Never mind the pool. The pool would not save him. Israel’s hope was not the pool, nor its Law. Israel’s hope was Jesus. Christ healed the man without recourse to the pool,

and that healing revealed that life, grace and truth only came through Jesus Christ.

Jesus taught the same lesson when He multiplied the loaves in the wilderness. Those who ate the loaves concluded from the miracle that He could be another Moses (had not Moses also given them manna bread from heaven?), and that He could bring them political liberation as Moses brought them to the Land of Canaan. That was why they wanted to make Him king by force (Jn. 6:15). Christ directed their attention away from such earthly bread, and such earthly salvation. What was the manna that Moses had given them?—bread that led ultimately to death. “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness and they died” (Jn. 6:49). Moses was not the one who gave real life. Christ’s Father was the One who gives life (v.32), and He was giving them the true life now, the true Bread—the Body and Blood of Jesus, the only real source of life for the dying (v.51). The manna in the wilderness was the old, as was the Law and covenant in which it was given. Christ was the new Bread, the bread which came down from heaven. If a man would eat this Bread, he would live forever (v.51). Now new things had come. The full wine-cups of Cana spoke of this new life, and of how the old ways of Judaism were giving place to the newness of the Kingdom.

Thirdly, the miracle of the wine reveals the essence of the Kingdom as joy. Surely it was not accidental that Christ's first miracle, His first "sign" (Greek *sēmeion*) involved creating a lot of wine, which the psalmist tells us was made to gladden the heart of man (Ps. 104:15). This miracle, like all of Christ's miracles, was motivated by His divine compassion. A wedding party would last for days, and for a young couple in a small town to begin their life together with a social disaster and disgrace would have been terrible for them. When the wine ran out, it threatened to overshadow their happiness, and cast upon them a lasting social stigma, in a culture where such things mattered. Christ therefore saved them from such shame. But more than that, He revealed that God delights in joy, in festivity, in a full heart and a full chalice. God is a God of abundance, and in His Kingdom He pours out His grace and His joy upon all. God apparently loves a party, and it is significant that Christ over and over again compared the Kingdom of God to a wedding party. This miracle at Cana, the first of His signs, shows us that God offers us abundant life, a life of song, of joy, of goodwill towards all around us. As St. John Chrysostom says to us every Pascha, "All of you, feast sumptuously; let no one go hungry away! All of you, enjoy the feast of faith! All of you, receive the riches of His loving-kindness! Let no one bewail his poverty, for the universal Kingdom has been revealed!" And that loving-kindness, that party, those riches, all the realities of the universal Kingdom, were first glimpsed and tasted long ago at a wedding in Cana of Galilee.

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