

Strange to begin the "Ordinary Sundays" with today's Gospel passage, since through this liturgical year, we will be hearing mostly from Luke, yet today we begin the season with John. This is an example of those occasions when the church departs from Matthew, Mark or Luke and gives us a taste of St. John's Gospel. John singles out Jesus' action at the wedding at Cana as the first miracle of Jesus' public ministry. John uses this word sign to describe Jesus' miracles that are outward signs of some kind of invisible spiritual reality.

Many of you know that Linda and I have been to the Holy Land twice, including the town of Cana. The home screen on my phone is a photo of Linda and I at a ceremony in the chapel at Cana, which was NOT a renewal of our wedding vows, since everyone knows that wedding vows are not renewed, like a drivers license.

So maybe the wedding feast of Cana is the best story to begin with, since it speaks so richly of God's desire to be one with us. All Jesus' words and actions in upcoming Sundays will show God's reaching out as a lover to his beloved - that's us - the community of his adopted sons and daughters.

The story is about more than turning water into wine. It is a "sign," and each "sign" is an epiphany - a manifestation of who Jesus is, and a sign of the nearness of God that he brings. These first weeks after Christmas are a season of "epiphanies."

So why is this particular miracle the first of his signs? If the heart of his mission was to conquer the devil, the first thing should have been an exorcism. If the heart of his mission was to overcome sickness, the first thing should have been a healing of a leper, or a paralyzed person. If the heart of his mission was to overcome the corruption of death, he should have raised someone from the dead.

We need a little background here. First-century Jews took weddings very seriously. The celebration of a wedding was a 7-day feast of family and friends gathering to celebrate the coming together of a bridegroom and his bride. Parishioners who are involved in our Small Church Communities are familiar with first-century Jewish weddings, so I'm inserting a suggestion here that you might consider joining a group.

With that much partying at a first-century Jewish wedding, it would be easy to run out of food or drink, and that's exactly what happens. Mary brings it to Jesus' attention with a mom-like suggestion that he do something about it. "They have no wine."

Their brief conversation includes Jesus referring to the hour of his passion and death - that's what "my hour" always refers to in John. How does he get from "running out of wine" to "the hour of his death?"

In Jewish tradition, what was known as "the banquet of the messiah" would be characterized by super-abundant wine. Isaiah, chapter 25, says that when the age of salvation comes, there will be a feast of fine wine, and that all the nations will come to this feast, and that when they drink of this wine and eat of this sacrificial banquet, they will swallow up death forever and their sins will be forgiven. So Mary's implied request, in the context of Mary's knowledge of who Jesus is, sounds like a request that Jesus reveal his identity as the Messiah, and to begin the banquet of the messiah.

But, as a good Jew, who is obedient to his mother, he solves the problem at the wedding by performing a sign that points forward to what he will accomplish when his hour finally does come. Since it's the job of the bridegroom to provide the wine, Jesus takes on the role of the bridegroom and miraculously changes water into wine.

This sign reveals to us that Jesus isn't just the Messiah, or the Savior, or the Son of God. He's all those things, but at the very heart of his ministry, he is revealing that he is, first and

foremost, the Bridegroom. In the Old Testament, the prophets describe God himself as the Divine Bridegroom.

Jesus is the Divine Bridegroom who has come in person to inaugurate the great wedding supper of the lamb. That's why it's the first sign, because the way Jesus is going to redeem us is through his love. His cross will be an act of love and that's what's going to cover a "multitude of sins." So it's the divine love of the divine bridegroom that's going to cover our sins.

Throughout the Bible, even in today's first reading, marriage is the symbol of the covenant relationship God desires with His chosen people. He is the bridegroom and all of humanity is his beloved and sought-after bride. If you want a refresher on covenants and the sacraments of our faith, our newest Bible Study begins this Thursday - there's a sign-up board available.

But today we're at Cana, it's not time for the institution of the New Covenant just yet. He's just getting started with his ministry, so he performs a sign that points forward to what he's going to accomplish with the New Covenant in the Upper Room and on Calvary, and his disciples begin to believe in him.

And we also believe in him. Through our faith, we know that in Jesus, God comes close to us, and gives us the reason and the means to celebrate this messianic banquet here today. The wedding at Cana prefigures this miracle of the real changing of the bread and wine into the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus.

So for us, God has saved the best wine till last. Amen?

With thanks to Brant Pitre.

- Deacon Jack Schaefer