

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN - COMMENTARY

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Lesson 2- John 2:1-25

**A Day of Wine—A Night of Glory
A Wedding and a Wine Miracle (John 2:1-11)**

Wednesdays were the preferred days for weddings. The Mishna, a collection of oral laws, established the rule about Wednesday weddings. In all probability the marriage feast at Cana was the customary midweek celebration. The bride and groom would have vowed themselves to one another under a wedding canopy—a reminder that in nomadic times this ceremony took place in a tent. Flowing wine cheered the hearts of the guests.

The gospel says the mother of Jesus was there. Oddly, this gospel never refers to her name, Mary, even though she appears in two of its most powerful scenes, Cana and the cross. Her prominent role at this wedding suggests she may have been a close relative of either the bride or groom. This may also account for the presence of Jesus.

Soon after his arrival, Mary told him there was no wine left. It is not clear how this embarrassing situation arose. Some have guessed it may have been caused by Jesus' new disciples, seven unexpected guests. This assumes they brought no wine gifts, most likely because they had no opportunity to purchase any.

Regardless of the cause, the crisis was real and Mary sought a solution. Apparently, nothing short of a miracle could solve the problem. Presumably, local village wine supplies had been exhausted. Or the family had no money left to buy more. The statement that preceded the forthcoming wine miracle ("They have no wine") is similar to that which introduced the bread miracle in the feeding of the five thousand ("They have no bread"). They have nothing to drink at Cana and they have nothing to eat in the wilderness.

In church history, Mary is our honored intercessor for divine favors. Already at Cana, acting as intercessor, she asked Jesus to help this bewildered couple and their families. We should remember that between Mary and her son there existed a bond, not just of an ordinary mother and an exceptionally devoted son, but that of a believer and a disciple. Her faith in her son began with her consent to conceive him. Her cousin Elizabeth had praised her for her religious faith.

For over thirty years the most remarkable relationship on earth had matured in the little village of Nazareth. Mary was the responsible mother raising a boy and guiding him into manhood. She was also contemplating the extraordinary mystery of her beloved Jesus. Her deep silences and prayers accompanied her instructions, laughter, tears, conversations, nursings, and whatever else it took to raise him. None of the busy-ness of being his mother would ever still the wonder in her heart. Seconds, minutes, hours, and years chronicled the sturdy advance of her faith. No relationship between a mother and son should ever be trivialized. In this case of Mary and her son, it would be reckless to do so.

Jesus proved to be the dutiful son. He obeyed her and grew in wisdom, age, and grace before all. While it is graceless to probe where Scripture itself remains silent, it is legitimate to say that Jesus was a loving and caring son. And it does not seem out of place to observe that in his communion with Mary, he revealed his inner self little by little through his everyday actions. If Mary's faith burned like a clear star, her son's self disclosure opened to her like the warmth of the sun.

The term "mystery" in Scripture means both something hidden and something revealed. Mystery is the unknown to be made known. The infinite mystery of Jesus can never be completely known. On the other hand, Jesus is not shrouded in thick darkness, so that his inner self can never be experienced. He is the "light" after all.

We hear a great deal today about the value of dialogue and interpersonal communion. That is exactly what went on between Mary and Jesus for thirty years prior to this hour at Cana. No Carmelite nun or Trappist monk has ever testified to having a deeper appreciation of Jesus than Mary did, even after their own thirty years of loving contemplation. In fact they claim they have only begun to taste the mystery of Jesus and are filled with what they call a "holy envy" of the faith of Mary.

It is perhaps no accident that this gospel places Mary in the center of things just after the call of the disciples. She is not only the mother of Jesus, but also his first and best disciple, for her call came three decades before from the lips of the angel Gabriel. She was both the teaching mother and the learning disciple.

This reflection about her relationship to Jesus puts into perspective the dialogue between them at Cana. Theirs is a communion so deep that the words on the gospel page should be matched by the unsaid words, the signals based on heart understandings rooted in thirty years of mutual exchange.

On the surface Mary seems to be asking nothing more than a practical favor, an act of simple charity to this distressed couple. At another level she is encouraging him to begin publicly his work of salvation.

At the Jordan, the heavenly Father commissioned Jesus to salvation ministry. At Cana, the earthly mother released him from home life and urged him to start his active ministry.

This clarifies Christ's enigmatic response to her. Jesus completely understood what she meant. Their communion as son and mother assured that outcome. His use of the word "hour" indicated a temporary hesitation about beginning his ministry. He is not talking about "clock time" but about the right, suitable, and appropriate time, what the Greeks called "kairos". Had Jesus concluded Mary was simply asking him a pragmatic favor, such as going out and trying to buy more wine, he would not have responded with messianic language about his "hour."

If this were only a matter of solving a family problem, Jesus would not have addressed her as "woman." Had he called her mother, he would have spoken of her physical parentage. By addressing her as "woman" he elevated her to a maternal role in the history of salvation. He spoke to her motherhood in the spirit, not just in the flesh. She would be concerned with the range of all human needs, but above all for the salvation of every man and woman.

Hence, Christ's words to Mary, which seem abrupt and even unfilial to us, are in fact a confirmation of her spiritual motherhood. The Christ light had shone on her faith and revealed to her the spiritual destiny that lay before her. The future beckoned her to open her maternal heart to all people. Nor was this a vague and fuzzy kind of call. It was specific and concrete. Decisively, Mary goes to the wine steward and tells him, "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5).

There were six water jars for ceremonial washings. Jesus told the servants to fill them with water. Each jar could hold twenty gallons. Jesus then instructed the servants to draw out some from the jars and take that to the headwaiter. When he tasted the water that became wine, he was astonished. He said that people usually serve the best wine first and then an inferior one after people had drunk copiously. In this case the best wine was saved for last. The fearful bride and groom need worry no more. The guests could enjoy themselves with 120 gallons of the finest wine.

This was the first sign by which Jesus would reveal his glory, his inner divinity, and call for faith from those who witnessed his action. The gospel says that from this moment, his disciples began to believe in him. They took the first tentative steps on their journey of faith. To them he was no longer just an impressive Rabbi, but someone who elicited from them the kind of faith they usually reserved for God.

The Cana miracle was the first of seven miracles—or signs—recorded in John's gospel. Here is a list of them.

1. The Wine Miracle (John 2:1-11)
2. Cure of the Nobleman's Son (John 4:46-54)
3. Healing the Impotent Man (John 5:2-9)
4. The Bread Miracle (John 6:4-13)
5. Walking on Water (John 6:16-21)
6. The Man Born Blind (John 9:1-41)
7. Raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-44)

John calls these events signs rather than miracles to emphasize that the miracles always had a religious purpose beyond their human uses. Each of the seven signs was a call to faith in the total person of Jesus. The wine miracle had its human goal, namely, to alleviate the anxiety of the wedding hosts. It also had a divine purpose—to challenge people to see the glory revealed by Jesus and respond with faith commitment to him. All seven sign-miracles in John have this same dual outcome, a human benefit and an invitation to a faith surrender to Jesus.

In our meditation on the Great Hymn in chapter one, we explored what it means to say one beholds the “glory” of the Word. We emphasized that it is a way of speaking about the Word of God's presence and our experience of that personal approach of the divine. This movement of the Word to make his presence felt in our lives is more than just getting acquainted. The Word has a greater interest in us than simply dropping by for a visit and killing time, however pleasantly. Jesus, the Word, wants to be present to us in such a way that he influences our awareness and desires with the force of his transforming love.

This happened at Cana. His wine miracle doubtless astonished his disciples. Amazing them, however, was not enough. Stunning people simply leaves them with their mouths open. Being wholly present to them with a love that is irresistible leaves them with an open heart. The glory of Jesus, which glowed that evening at Cana amid the smiles of a spring night, the abandon of youthful dancers and the joy of hearts warmed by the best wine ever drunk, probed deeply into the souls of his new disciples and insisted on a rush of faith. The gospel says they began to believe at that hour.

The wine miracle contains three other Christian teachings. First, it announces the arrival of messianic times. The wedding party had 120 gallons of wine, the equivalent of nearly 500 bottles. Such abundance recalled the prophecy of Amos that in the era of the messiah, rivers of wine would flow in the Judean hills. “The juice of grapes shall drip down the mountains, and all the hills shall run with it” (Amos 9:13).

Second, it argues that the most stable source of ecstasy is union with Jesus. This is why the liturgy of early Christianity chose the Cana story as one of the readings for January 6th, the feast of the Epiphany.

Greek pagan religion had used that date to celebrate the festival of Dionysus, the god of wine. On some wealthy estates, wine flowed from the water fountains to mark the feast.

The pagan holiday legitimized public intoxication and socially approved drunkenness. This alcohol induced ecstasy repelled Christians because of its orgiastic outcomes and dehumanizing effects. The use of God's gift of wine had become an abuse. Christians did not disdain the prudent use of wine, but condemned its abuse. They replaced this Dionysian frenzy with the restrained festival of the Epiphany—the manifestation of Christ's glory. The "wine" of Christ's Holy Spirit was a true and enduring source of human happiness.

Third, the Cana miracle symbolized the wine of the Holy Eucharist. This is the sacramental interpretation of the miracle. The Lord's Supper would be centered on the wine and the bread, the wine becoming his blood of the covenant and the bread becoming his body to be broken. The bread miracle of John 6 will balance this imagery at Cana.

The Cana story is a poem condensed into eleven verses. At first sight it seems to be little more than a charming tale of a village wedding. The couple faced an unexpected problem. A sympathetic family member asks her son to help them. By turning out to be a prophetic wonder worker, Jesus produces a surprising solution. But like all great poetry, the tightly packed words need to be unraveled. The genius of John was his ability to store in these few verses a deep revelation, which has become for us an immensely rich source for our faith reflection and development. To speak of this incident as poetry is not to question its history, but rather to insist that the history was related to us with the skill of a poet.

Jesus Purifies the Temple (John 2:12-25)

It was Passover time, so Jesus went to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast at the temple. He found the sellers of oxen, sheep and doves marketing the sacrificial animals at prices far above the going rate. The temple officials had a monopoly on these animals which they claimed were the only ones suitable for sacrifice. Poorer people were trapped into buying from them rather than at more reasonable prices from other markets. To make matters worse, they could only use the temple currency, so they had to exchange their money for temple cash—and naturally had to pay a fee for the exchange.

This commercializing of the Passover sacrifices infuriated Jesus who made a whip of cords. Thus armed, he roared through the stalls, overthrowing the tables, spilling the money on the marble floors, and chasing the animals out of the enclosures and cages. He shouted at the owners that they were a disgrace, making his Father's house of prayer into a den of thieves. His radical behavior reminded his disciples of Jeremiah the prophet who had condemned these same practices centuries ago (Jeremiah 7:10). Seeing Christ's fury, they remembered the words of the psalmist: "...zeal for your house consumes me" (Psalms 69:10).

The temple rulers asked him what was the meaning of his action. Jesus said, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). They replied that it took forty-six years to build it. How could he rebuild it in three days? This kind of exchange will happen many times in John. Commentators call it "Johannine irony." Someone asks a question at a purely natural level. Christ's answer is at a spiritual level. The questioner comes back with a literalistic response, missing Christ's point. Here, the gospel writer adds, after the misunderstanding of the rulers, that Jesus was talking about the temple of his body, not the stone and marble building before them.

The history of spiritual masters is full of similar teaching devices. Asian spiritual teachers use "koans," mysterious sayings that are meant to jolt the listeners out of their everyday perceptions, such as, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" The reality of God is both very far away from ordinary perception and at the same time intimately close. But the flow of daily preoccupations blinds us from experiencing God. Jesus would strive to break this self-limiting perception with his mysterious sayings. It is like shock therapy for the human spirit, shaking the listener into a flash of spiritual insight.

Jesus is doing more than scoring debating points. He is truly attempting to help the temple rulers escape from the religious routines which had stalled their spiritual development. It is the same for us. We have heard his saying about the temple of his body for many years. We assume we are more perceptive than the temple rulers because we know the gospel interpretation. Our challenge is to look at our own frozen perceptions, religious routines, and dispassionate approaches and see Jesus in a fresh and vital way.

Certain life experiences will awaken us from our spiritual lethargy. The birth of a child, the death of a spouse or other family member, an accident, a sudden illness, the loss of a job, a move to a new neighborhood, these are potential spiritual awakeners. They snap the predictable flow of our lives and induce reflection. If we are sufficiently alert, these teachable moments can put us in touch with the stillpoint deep within our souls where Jesus, the Word, the light seeks to influence our affectivity and attitudes.

Another ordinary way to escape the deadening force of routine is meditation time everyday where we surrender with sharp attention to the sounds of silence within our hearts. This daily discipline makes us remember we have an inner life that is just as real as the busy one outside. A regular journey into our inner selves puts us in touch with the dynamism of our souls and the light and love of Jesus. This constant exercise of our spiritual life makes our external moral, doctrinal, and liturgical behavior ring with vitality and undercuts the inertia that otherwise stalls us.

We all suffer from forgetfulness of being. We forget the vast inner world we carry around inside us and settle for the narrow, small, confining world of externals. It is too dark to interpret itself. Only Jesus can light up this world of immediacy. An inner dialogue with him makes this possible.

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