

THERE WAS A WEDDING

Sermon at the Eucharist
on the Fourth Sunday of the Epiphany

Readings: I Kings 17. 8-16; I Corinthians 1. 18-end; John 2. 1-11.

THIS is a story about being a host and being a guest, and the difference between the two. I remember a service in a cathedral, long, long ago, and far, far away, and nothing at all to do with Worcester, when the bishop of the diocese was presiding and the bishop of another diocese had been invited to preach the sermon. But the bishop who had been invited to preach the sermon forgot that he was a guest, and as soon as he found himself in the cathedral pulpit, he went on to episcopal autopilot. He thanked the dean and chapter for holding the service, and the organist for playing the organ, and the vergers for verging, and invited everyone to refreshments afterwards. I had a good view of the face of the bishop of the diocese while all this was going on, and it was a picture. So it is important for guests to remember that they are guests, and not to play the host.

Except that the gospel story this morning is the exception to the rule. Here the guest not only plays the host, but turns out to *be* the host. So let's reconstruct the scene as best we can. The heart of a Jewish wedding at the time was not a religious ceremony, except that in the sense that in Judaism everything is religious. Even in the Christian tradition, a religious wedding ceremony is not a *very* ancient custom, quite unknown in the early Christian centuries. In biblical times, the wedding 'event' was the procession of the bride to the bridegroom's house, followed by hours and days of feasting and merry-making. So a lot of wine was needed, and a wedding that ran out of wine was in a bad way.

This wedding was at Cana, about nine miles from Nazareth, and the home town of Nathaniel, recently called by Jesus to be his disciple. So Nathaniel may be the reason why Jesus and the other disciples were invited, but we don't know the reason for the mother of Jesus to be there. Perhaps everyone was related to everyone else in that neighbourhood of small villages.

Now St John does not chronicle events just because they happened. He selects the events of Jesus's life that tell a deeper story, the deeper story of who Jesus is, and how he came from God, and how he gathered up the world into the love of God, and how he showed us the glory of God breaking into every part of our world. And St John tells us that what happened at Cana was the first of Jesus's *signs*, the first revealing of his glory, and the first opportunity for his disciples to put their faith in him. St John doesn't talk much about the kingdom of God, in the way the other three gospel-writers do; but when he talks of God's 'glory' he means much the same as Matthew, Mark, and Luke mean, when they talk of God's 'kingdom' – gathering up the world into the glorious reign of God, as long foretold by the prophets. That's the deeper story of Jesus to which St John is alluding throughout the surface-story of a country wedding.

So as the surface-story unfolds, we see the glory of God coming into the picture. The water for the Jewish rites of purification becomes the wine of God's kingdom; the Old Testament gives way to the time to which the Old Testament looked forward, the time of the Messiah. And the quantity of God's wine is overwhelming: 120 gallons of it, which is more than enough for any wedding.

There was a prophetic book in circulation at the time, called the Second Book of Baruch, not old enough to be in the Old Testament, but one which St John may have known. And this book pictures the life of the earth gathered into the kingdom of God, in which the fruits of the earth yield ten-thousandfold. Every vine will have a thousand branches, says Baruch, and every branch a thousand clusters, and every cluster a thousand grapes, and every grape will yield (wait for it) 120 gallons of wine. So what may seem rather a lot of wine for one wedding, says St John, is nothing at all: this is one grape's worth of wine in the kingdom of God.

The steward of the feast (the best man, as it were) says to the bridegroom: 'Everyone serves the good wine first. But you have kept the good wine until now.' And St John adds, '*Jesus did this*'. In the surface-story of the country wedding, Jesus is the guest. But in the deeper story of the kingdom of God, the glory of

God, Jesus is the *host*; indeed, Jesus is the bridegroom, the host of the heavenly banquet, which is so often described in scripture as a wedding-feast.

There is a strand of Christian piety which makes much of the importance of inviting Jesus into one's life. In some Christian traditions, that conscious deliberate invitation is the essential moment of becoming a Christian. I don't mind that; it was the tradition in which I was brought up, and I could name the date on which I made that conscious invitation to Jesus. But it is a picture of *me* as the *host* inviting *Jesus* as the *guest* into *my* life, and that's not the *whole* picture. It needs to be balanced and amplified by other pictures, such as this story of the wedding at Cana, where Jesus the invited guest turns out to be the Lord of the feast. Or the story of Emmaus, where two disciples invite a stranger into their home, but the stranger takes the head of the table and breaks the bread, and the disciples recognize the risen Lord. Or that story of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus commandeers Simon Peter's boat and tells him how to fish. If I ask Jesus into my heart, or my home, or my boat, or my work, or the plan that I have for the rest of my life, he will not stay there simply as a guest; he will take possession of it - he will take possession of *me*, for I belong to him already, and he enters my life to claim what is his own.

And thank God for that. What would the wedding at Cana have been had not the Lord taken charge? Or the supper at Emmaus? Or Simon Peter and his night of fruitless fishing? Or my life if I try to keep hold of it, and ask Jesus in on condition that he is only a guest? The stone jars of water which is what my life amounts to when I try to run it myself will never be the overflowing wine, which is what my life might be, and what God meant it to be.

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The wedding at Cana is mentioned at every marriage service, and marriage has been in the news in recent weeks: who can and can't be married in church, and which loving human relationships can and can't be blessed by God. It's not my intention to re-enter that debate this morning; and I find my appetite for

ecclesiastical controversy fading with the years. How pointless so many of those controversies now seem! Twenty wasted years in the earlier part of my ministry debating the marriage in church of divorced people; before that decades of debating the ethics of birth control; a hundred years ago the Lambeth Conference solemnly discussing whether artificial contraception would not deplete the 'best stocks of the civilized nations'; and the then archbishop of Canterbury wondering whether allowing women in wartime *not* to wear hats in church might not contribute something to the war effort. Arid, futile, mainly male controversies, like so many jars of stone cold water. Where, one wonders, was the wine of God's kingdom in all of that?

Later in St John's Gospel, Jesus says: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'. That is the message of this morning's gospel; as it is the message which should inform all our debates and controversies, our thoughts and our words, and govern our whole lives: where is abundance of life to be found? It was found that day in Cana: can we not find it today in England, in the Church of England, in Worcester, here in this Cathedral?

PETER ATKINSON
Dean of Worcester

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