

SERMON FOR THE 2ND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY (Cape Town - 18 January 2009)

Text: ¹ On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, ² and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³ When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." ⁴ "Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come." ⁵ His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." ⁶ Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. ⁷ Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. ⁸ Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, ⁹ and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside ¹⁰ and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now." ¹¹ This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him. (John 2:1-11)

Weddings are always very special. There is a lot of joy ... and invariably always a bit of anxiety. I remember my own wedding very well. I wasn't so young anymore, just over 31, and I was rather nervous about this huge commitment I was making. Maggi noticed it because when I am nervous my hands start sweating. . So we joked it about on the way to church, saying we need to put on the child lock so that I I can't bail out. But once the commitment was made there was pure joy and everybody was happy.

I won't forget the wedding of Jason and Faith either. I wonder whether I can tell this. But on the Friday before the wedding (about two years ago), we did a rehearsal in the Strand Street Lutheran Church. Jason stood in front and Mike, the dad, led his daughter solemnly down the aisle. As Mike "practiced" to hand his daughter over to his future son-in-law, first he and then Faith both started crying. I said: "Gee guys, we are practicing. This isn't the real thing yet". But the next day, when I expected them to cry they were happy and the reception afterwards was simply great.

Now isn't it interesting that Jesus' public ministry in John's Gospel starts off at a wedding banquet!

I

The first point I would like to make is: Jesus shares in our joy.

That is not the way we usually visualize him. I believe there is a wide-spread perception that Christianity is a faith for those people who are not coping very well in life, who are struggling and are in desperate need of help and comfort. And to a

degree, it is true of course. So often in the Gospels we see a very companionate Jesus amongst the poor, the sick, the wailing and the mourning. But from this we must not deduce, that he is not amongst those that are happy and are celebrating.

Here in Cana he is at a wedding. People are happy and they are partying. And in the middle of the party - talking, laughing, drinking - is Jesus with his disciples. He is not a spoilsport as some may believe, always ready to take us on guilt trip. No, by being at the wedding banquet with his friends he *affirms* life and all the beauty and happiness that life has to offer.

It is definitely not without meaning, that the evangelist John placed the wedding banquet in Cana right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. By doing so he already makes a statement of contrasts to his readers. He contrasts the temple life of law and regulations with the new life that Jesus brings. It is a life "inspired" by the *presence of God*, which is not confined to temple worship (here I have to be pious!), but covers all spheres of life.

The ancient Jews somehow associated the coming Kingdom of God with two things: (1) The temple and (2) judgement. But that is not the way Jesus is portrayed by John. He is invited to a wedding banquet and that is where we find him. And John intimates, wherever Jesus is, there is joy. And life is a feast, not in the absence of Jesus (when we keep him out) , but it is a feast *because* he is there. That is when the feast really takes off.

For us this becomes a nudge or prod to invite Jesus into all those closed off areas of our life. I invite him to my Friday evening party... and he comes and his presence brings pure joy. I invite him to my work place. I invite him into my house, my family, my marriage. I invite him to my dinner table: "Come Lord Jesus be our guest and let Thy gifts to us be blessed." And every time I invite him, he is there.

The arrival of God's Kingdom means, we have a God right here amongst us, and his presence inspires us, brings us joy.

II

The second point I would like to make is this: Jesus provides us with the best joy.

Jesus arrives inconspicuously as one guest amongst many others. But the roles are soon reversed. The guest becomes the host and what Jesus bring surpasses everything the original host had planned.

In ancient times weddings stretched over days. It is not always easy to plan these weddings. Talking to a father who had a wedding this past weekend, he said: "The weather saved me". I asked: "Why?" He said: "Earlier in the week it was so hot, but on the day of the wedding the weather changed. You won't believe how much it saved me on drinks." I said: "My children will definitely marry in the middle of winter."

Well, here is a wedding that stretched over days. If the wine ran out, it was potentially a dire situation for the host. He would experience a serious loss of honour. And not only the father, but the whole extended family who were obligated to bring wine.

Jesus' mother who might have been a member of the extended family obviously noted what was happening. She therefore called Jesus to one side and discreetly told him about the shortage of wine. To our Western ears Jesus' answer seems rather impolite if not disrespectful. He says to his mother: "**Women, why do you involve me?**" But there is not disrespect in these words. Nor are they are rebuff, because Mary immediately goes to the servants and says: "**Do whatever he tells you.**"

And indeed, shortly afterwards Jesus did something. He called the servants and tolled them to fill six stone jars, used for washing the feet of the guests, with water. And when the servants present the water to the master of the banquet to taste it, he indicates: "This is the best. This wine is even better than we had before."

But this story is not so much about Chardonnay, Merlot or Pinotage. Wine is a metaphor for life. The life that Jesus brings is the best.

When Matthew, Mark and Luke talk about the "tree of life" that bears good fruit, John speaks about the "wine and its branches". But the wine at the wedding of Cana, as all material things of this world, ran out. These things never suffice to quench our thirst. Wolfgang Goethe, the German writer wrote: "I romp from desire to pleasure, and in pleasure I languish to burn in desire again". The pleasures of this world, sweet as they may be, never satisfy.

But with the Kingdom of God comes the best, and it does so *in abundance*. Those jars filled with water were huge. They needed to be as the water was used to wash the feet of the arriving guests. Each jar took 80 to 120 liters of water. One jar would have sufficed for the wine. But Jesus had all six filled. The master of the banquet could scoop and scoop and scoop. Jesus is generous and lavish in the joy he shares.

But there is a subtle twist in the story. The miracle is sensational. Something, I am sure, we all wish would happen today. But interestingly it is observed by only a few. The servants knew where the wine came from, but their reaction is not even noted. The master of the banquet is a wine connoisseur. But he gets stuck on the exquisite taste of the wine: He makes no further inquiry. The only ones that grasp the truth of what transpired are the disciples of Jesus: Their hearts are filled with joy and awe, not because of the wine, but because they realized: This is the Messiah.

III

This leads us to the last point: Jesus does not only provide us with the best joy, he himself is the joy.

Our passage ends with the words: ***“This [was], the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed”***. The servants and the master of the banquet just saw the “sign”. But they never saw to whom the sign pointed.

It is no different today. We drink wine, we enjoy food, we run our businesses, we make our profits, but we don’t see where these “signs” point to. We are like the wedding guest: We gulp down the wine. But we don’t notice who is the provider. We don’t recognize the one who is in our midst. In fact, we don’t even notice, that a “miracle” took place.

But there in Cana the “glory of God” was revealed. As always this glory was concealed by the earthly. The only thing you could see with your naked eye was water or wine. But some saw beyond it. It was only a handful of people: The disciples of Jesus. Of them we read: ***“[Jesus] revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.”*** They saw the glory of God. They experienced “epiphany”.

Let me tell you: This wine miracle is not confined to Cana. It happens every day: At home, at work, here in our service. It is the miracle of God’s presence. It is the miracle of the one who brings us true and lasting joy. But as always only a few will see it.

Seeing starts by inviting this Lord to every sphere of your life. He will bring you joy, the best joy. But you won’t see or experience it, if your eyes are fixed on the material, or on the letters of the Law. You need to look “beyond”. Amen.

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