THE NEW SHOFAR

The good news is that in the face of Jesus Christ we see the very face of God, the One who has decided to be with us and for us despite our sin.

JANUARY 19th

We need to read John's Gospel in the form John wrote

When it comes to interpreting narratives in John's Gospel, we need to remember that John was not concerned about history. The "facts" of Jesus' life and ministry have already been adequately established in the other three Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke. His concern was rather to bring out the truth of Jesus as they now perceived it (with John writing in the 90's), the fuller significance of the historical life and mission of Jesus which only became clear to them with the passing of some decades. For John the truth of Jesus was much fuller and richer than the historical facts of what he said and did during the three years of his mission. When reading John, we need to try and put ourselves back into the culture, times and historical setting in which he was writing. Even more difficult, we need to be open to John's literary style, to the kind of language he was using. He picks up threads of Jewish mystical theology, prophetic expectations and the full gamut of God's saving works in Israel. John is a Jew. A Jew using Greek and Semitic forms to reveal theological insights regarding Jesus, not for the sake of theological discourse, but so that all can come to know Jesus as the Christ.

Understanding what Jesus is saying to Mary

When Mary outlines to her son the problem with the wine at the wedding, he responds to her by saying, *Woman, what's that to you and to me?* The RSV is a little strong here with this, *What do you have to do with me*? It makes it sound like the opposition is between Mary and Jesus, but a better translation of the Greek is a little different: *how does this situation concern us*? Which is a good question to ask, even on a human level, because Jesus and Mary are both guests at the wedding. If someone goes to a wedding and they run out of wine, it is not the responsibility to fix it. That is the responsibility of the host. But Jesus says something else, pointing to something of far more significance. Jesus is highlighting: My hour is not yet. He is sent by God. He follows God timetable and none other. Doing God's work.

The Jewish anticipation of a Messianic Banquet

In John's gospel, that declaration points forward to his passion and death, the hour of the cross, the hour of his passion. And so, mysteriously, somehow Mary's words, *they have no wine*, had been taken by Jesus as not referring to the problem of the practical loss of wine, but somehow to refer to the hour of his passion and his death.

But that leaves us with a puzzle: How does Jesus get from "A" to "Z"? How does he get from "running out of wine" to "the hour of the cross"? The answer to that question takes us back to the messianic banquet tradition of ancient Judaism.

The writing making a significant contribution to this theology is found in the book of Isaiah, particularly in chapter 25. *On this mountain Almighty Yahweh will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-*

matured wines strained clear. [7] And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; [8] he will swallow up death for ever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for Yahweh has spoken. Such is the transformation of the earth that will accompany the arrival of Messiah, the best way of describing the magnificence of the moment was that of a fine wedding feast. The joy of that time is beyond measure.

In Jewish tradition it came to become called the "messianic banquet", the banquet of the messiah, which would be particularly characterized by super abundant wine. And so, when Mary says "they have no wine" and invites Jesus, as a guest, to solve the problem, in a first century Jewish context, (and in the context of Mary's knowledge of who Jesus is), Jesus also perceives there an implicit request to reveal his identity as the Messiah, and to, in a sense, inaugurate the messianic banquet. And what Jesus says to Mary, effectively, is "it's not time for that banquet just yet. My hour has not yet come."

When God blesses, it is always with an overabundance of joy

But, as a good Jew, who is obedient to his mother, he solves the problem at the wedding at Cana, and in doing so, performs **a sign** pointing forward to what he will accomplish when his hour finally does come. For this reason, he calls the servants, and they pour the water out. He changes water to wine, and not just a little, it's about 180 gallons of wine. That is 6 jars, around 113 litres! **Each**! That's a lot of wine, a veritable messianic banquet of wine, which is John's point. When God blesses, he is not limited just to human needs. As God created the overabundance of good things in the Garden of Eden, so too now God does the same.

He makes super abundance of wine, *of well-matured wines strained clear… of well-matured wines.* And John continues with his revelation of the true identity of Jesus. The wine is brought to the steward of the feast, and he tastes it and immediately goes to the bridegroom, who is unnamed, but whose Greek word, *nymphios*, is a reference to the groom, the man who is being married that day. The irony here is that the steward thanks the bridegroom for providing the wine, but as the reader knows the bridegroom of that festival had nothing to do with it. Who provided the wine? What happens is that Jesus takes the role of the bridegroom and miraculously changes water into wine at this wedding feast. His first sign.

Here we come to the heart of what John is communicating: Jesus is not just the King of Israel. He is not just the Messiah. Nor simply the Savior, or the Son of God, or the Great Exorcist, or the Great Teacher, or the Great Prophet. Jesus is presented as being all those things, but here at the very onset of his ministry, at the heart of his ministry, he is revealing that he is first and foremost, the Bridegroom. Because, as we're going to see in a moment, in the Old Testament, the bridegroom, who provides the miraculous feast, who brings in the age of salvation is God himself. The prophets had described God himself as ***the Divine Bridegroom***. Israel is His bride and his relation to them was as loving husband.

Here at the very beginning of the Gospel, John presents Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph and Mary, a guest at the wedding at Cana as God's messiah. He is not just a man, but he is the divine Son of God. He is the Divine Bridegroom who has come in person to inaugurate the great wedding supper of the lamb, the feast of salvation, the banquet of the kingdom of God. This Jesus is the One sent by God; the One long-awaited; the eagerly anticipated Christ. And that is what has the power to transform our lives and the world around us.