

I've always been in awe of quilters. Their ability to construct beauty from small bits of fabric amazes me. Ann-Lining Smith, an amazing quilter who also happens to be an Episcopal priest and who often took our services in the interim period before Mary Elizabeth was called as rector, made us the three quilted hangings for the Long Green Season. When I visited Ann-Lining in the middle of her creative process, she was surrounded by pieces of fabric. Partly by trial and error and partly through a special way of seeing she took pieces of this seeming chaos and picked out the very best pattern for her design.

I think the gospel writers, whoever they were, were a little bit like quilters. They took the stories and the sayings of Jesus that they heard among the early Christians and put them together to make a coherent pattern. Probably none of them actually met Jesus in the flesh but, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote down what they had heard and what seemed most important to them and to the people they were writing for. Matthew and Luke both based their gospels on Mark and probably on another written source that no longer exists, and they both added stories and teachings to make the pattern that they saw in Jesus' life.

John, however is the master quilter. He was very careful about which pictures of Jesus he used. I imagine him looking at each one very carefully, turning it this way and that and then sewing it into a very specific pattern to make his unique account of the good news of Jesus Christ, the light coming into the world. It is only John who gives us this account of the wedding at Cana. We don't know exactly when in his life it happened but he says that his time has not yet come – presumably meaning that he wasn't yet truly ready to let people know that he was the Christ. So we can see it as something of a prequel.

I'm a great fan of Rowan Atkinson, the comedian perhaps best known for creating 'Mr. Bean'. If you've never seen him as Mr. Bean you might remember him in *Blackadder*, or as the vicar in *Five Weddings and a Funeral* who blesses in the name of "The Father, the Son and the Holy Sp..Sp...Sp..Spigot." I have an old comedy tape – old enough that it's on VHS – where Atkinson tells the story of the wedding at Cana. In his version, the steward did not know where the wine came from, "but the servants did know and they applauded loudly in the kitchen... and inquired of him, "Do you do children's parties?" and the Lord said, "No."¹

Atkinson has put his finger on something that has often bothered me about this story. It seems a bit like a magic trick. Most of Jesus' miracles involve healing or feeding or the natural world. This one is quite different, it seems rather trivial and domestic. So why did John, the master quilter choose to use it as his introduction to the signs that Jesus did?

At first glance it may seem that Jesus is either helping the host who underestimated his guests' capacity for wine to save face; or obeying his mother; or maybe proving to his new disciples that he is the real thing. But remember that just as we would not understand Atkinson's skit if we had never heard the story of the wedding at Cana or had never heard of Jesus, so we cannot fully understand the stories of the New Testament without knowing a something about the Old.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umRRckspaQU>

At the time of Jesus, the Jewish imagination was well-versed in the “messianic banquet.” This was the belief that when the Messiah came and all was set to right, Jews and Gentiles would gather for a great feast. In Isaiah 25 we read,

On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
A feast of rich food for all nations,
A banquet of aged wine –
The best of meats and the finest of wines.
On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfold all peoples,
The sheet that covers all nations;
He will swallow up death for ever. (Isaiah 25 6-8a)

I doubt that this was interpreted literally but served as a metaphor for the well-being and rejoicing and abundance that would accompany the Messiah. Wine was a symbol of well-being. One of the great images of shalom or peace from the prophet Micah was that everyone would “sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one [would] make them afraid”. (Mic 4:4)

So, for the people of Jesus’ time, wine was much more than a local industry or a way to get happy. Wine was a symbol of all that was hoped for, of all of God’s promises brought to fulfillment.

And here, at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, in fact before it has really started, we see Jesus turning water into wine. Taking a common though precious element and turning it into something even more valuable – something to make life merry as Ecclesiastes says. (Ec. 10:19)

In John the gospel writer’s eyes, as Jesus does so, as he turns the water into wine, he is symbolically declaring the reign of God. He is symbolically declaring that the time has come when there will be a “feast of food for all nations, a banquet of aged wine”; he is declaring himself to be the Messiah. “And his disciples believed in him.” (v.11)

The Jewish notion of the messianic banquet has been absorbed into Christian thinking and imagination. But of course it is changed because now it is Christ, whom we know in Jesus, who brings the banquet, not some unknown but longed for Messiah. We know that the banquet of Jesus the Lamb comes not when we have finally gotten rid of all our enemies by fighting and killing them, but when peace comes through the path of non-violence and the grace of God.

This is the new covenant with God, the one that we celebrate in our Eucharist. The new covenant where we no longer have to try to obey a long list of rules, but are transformed by the renewing of our minds and the changing of our hearts by the Holy Spirit working in cooperation with our own wills. The new covenant of gentleness and peace. The new covenant sealed with Jesus’ blood as he dies on the cross but celebrated in his glorious resurrection and symbolized in the Eucharistic wine.

We see this in the wedding at Cana; it is a time of joy and festivity, and in the middle of it Jesus quietly turns water into wine, wine which is better than they had had. This new covenant is better than the one which went before...in Mark, Jesus says, “No one pours new wine into old

wineskins. Otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined.” (Mark 2:22). Jesus is proclaiming the reign of God in the new wine, wine which cannot be contained in the old but which bursts out of the old containers.

It is, of course, important for us to remember that there are many paths to God and that God welcomes people who still live under the old covenants; the covenants made with the people of Israel. Our path is one of humility and gentleness, not of triumphant crowing about how much better we are than another. John’s gospel in particular has been used to justify anti-Semitism. Racism or discrimination of any sort has no place in the Christian life. Jesus’ life – Christ’s blood - is shed for all and the redemption of creation which is the ultimate goal is necessarily the redemption of all creatures.

It is no coincidence that this miracle which proclaims that Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed one, happens at a wedding. Just as the banquet of the Messiah permeates some of the ancient prophecies, so the symbolism of marriage appears again and again in the Bible, as it does in the work of psychologists like Carl Jung. Marriage is a symbol of the union we can experience with the divine. In Jung, it is the marriage of the opposites within the individual Self but in the Bible it is the union of Israel and Yahweh, and later Christ and the Church. So there is the important idea that we are united with God not just as individuals but as a collective. We hear this in Ephesians “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word and to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish but holy and blameless.” (Eph 5:26)

We are the Body of Christ and we are also being made into the Bride of Christ. So we cannot afford to ignore any other person who is part of the church. Each one of us is needed. As the reading we heard from Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth says, “there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” However bizarre it seems, each one of us is equally important, equally part of the Body of Christ, being prepared for the great wedding feast.

And we celebrate this truth and hope in our Eucharist. This is not just a time to remember that Christ died for us, not just a time to offer our own sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, not just a time to be renewed by the food and drink of God, but also a foretaste of that heavenly banquet. A symbolic joining in the one cup, the cup of the new covenant which binds us to God and to one another, and which foretells the day when we will enjoy the banquet of the Lamb.

In Revelation we hear “blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” (Rev 19:9) We are the ones who are invited. We are the ones who are given the new wine of Jesus to drink. We are the ones who are called and commissioned to work and pray for the coming of the reign of God.

Water into wine isn’t a party trick; it is the glorious work of the Son of God manifest in a wedding party in a small Palestinian town. It is the foretelling of Christ’s glory.

It is a metaphor of our salvation. Alleluia!