

This morning, let us primarily consider our Gospel lesson from the second chapter according to St. John. And let's begin by not ignoring the elephant in the room. There is some controversy regarding this passage, particularly around the interaction of Jesus and Mary, and I'm sure that in the next few minutes, we will *completely* resolve any questions!

In verse 3 of St. John chapter 2, Mary approaches Jesus and says, "They have no wine." To which in the next verse Jesus replies, "Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come." Then Mary in verse 5 tells the servants, "Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it."

The first problem here is that Jesus' response seems harsh to us, particularly because He calls her "Woman", and to us this is depersonalizing. This isn't "Mother," or "Yes, Ma'am" which we understand as endearing and respectful, and so we impose our cultural use of the term upon Jesus' reply. Think about the medieval use of the term "My Lady," which is similar, but has a different connotation to us than "Woman." It is good to note also that Christ used this same term affectionately of His mother from the cross when He commended her care to the apostle John. John 19:26 reads, "When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son!" It is difficult therefore to read anything particular into this term of address.

Secondly, Christ does reproach Mary here, saying first, "what have I to do with thee?" Again, we have a cultural barrier in the way, so should not presume that this is a spoken in a rude manner. Jesus is saying that His priorities and hers are of a different nature. They two are at cross purposes. Mary is concerned with immediate needs, while Christ is beginning His earthly ministry that has eternal and cosmic consequences. Then He says, "mine hour is not yet come." She desires something of Him now, and yet it appears that Jesus was of course not primarily concerned at this time with the problems of the hosts of this wedding. There is something untoward about Mary's request, but Christ is not necessarily rude or curt; He does express that this concern is not what He should be focused upon. I've always read this as if there was a tone of teasing, as is common in families, in this interaction. Jesus could follow His response with a wink and we would read this much differently. But honestly, there is no textual justification here for that position, either.

We do know that Mary here does not take this reply as a *stern* rebuke. She is not shut down, but persists in her request, even expecting Jesus to resolve this matter, by saying to the servants, "Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it." Of course she knows well of His miraculous birth, and has pondered the visit of the magi and the pronouncements of Simeon and Anna in the temple, and the events around the visit of the twelve-year-old Jesus to the temple years ago. And over the years, she no doubt has witnessed Jesus' ability to solve everyday problems and bring peace in the midst of strife and struggle. Does she here expect Jesus to provide more wine? Does she think that He will come up with another solution to the problem – maybe convincing some of the guests to contribute their own wine to the celebrations? We can't conclude that she has a fixed expectation of just how Christ will work out the solution, but she is confident that He will.

Christ did say that His hour was not yet come. So it is also worth considering what precisely is the status of Jesus' ministry at this time. We see in the first chapter of St. John's

gospel, the immediately preceding chapter, that John the Baptist has borne witness to Jesus as the Chosen One of God, "Whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose." Then we see that the Baptist points Christ out to two of his own disciples, Andrew and another whom we suppose to be the Apostle John. Later, Andrew introduces his brother Peter to Christ, then the following day, Christ calls Phillip and Nathanael, and then on the third day they all attend the wedding in Cana. So at this time Christ is gathering His disciples around Him, but He has not yet formed the full company. He has not yet fully embarked upon His primary mission.

Considering all of this background, there are some conclusions we are justified in making about the scenario here described. First, we can say that Mary is close with the family of the groom (or maybe the bride). In verse 9, the passage reads, "The governor of the feast called the bridegroom," so it is fair to assume that the groom's family was responsible for the wine and that Mary, therefore, had a connection with this family and was privy to the inner workings of the feast. We can also assert that Christ did not answer her harshly or rudely. Why? Because we know Jesus is neither cruel nor rude, and because He did actually answer her request. And based on Christ's words, we can also assert that He would not have performed this miracle at this time had Mary not interceded for her friends. Finally, Mary had nowhere else to turn to save her friends from real embarrassment, and yet because she knows Jesus better than anyone else at this time, she turns to Him as her only help, and she is not disappointed.

And there are a few other points to note as well. Just like the story of the boy Jesus in the temple who was found on the third day, this event also takes place "on the third day," so it points us toward the resurrection imagery. This is a story of new life, of a transformation of a life of scarcity and want and separation to a joining and an abundance, to a new life in union created out of the life of death. All of the events of the life of Christ, especially these we read during the season of Epiphany point us to the theme of resurrection and to living in the new life given us in Christ as a continuing manifestation of Him to the world. Weddings are a resurrection, for in them a death takes place. Two individuals vow to die to themselves and to live to each other. And out of the marriage bond, new human lives are miraculously created. Marriage is the central analogy of the Bible; the Holy Scriptures begin in Genesis with a wedding, end in Revelation with a wedding, and here, right in the middle, we also have a wedding. So the Bible is the love story of God with His people. They tell us that God wishes to become united to us, to be married to us. He will be our God and we will be His people. This affirmation is for all practical considerations the same ancient marriage formula: "I will be your husband and you will be my wife."

Lastly we must take note that in the celebration of this union, we view the completion of human thriving. We see the fullest and best of human life. Wine is a symbol of the blessings of God poured out upon us. And the wine that Christ miraculously provides is not an inferior vintage. It is the best – so much so that it startles the governor of the feast. "Everyone brings out the best first, but you have saved it until the end." This is a picture for us of blessing upon blessing pointing us to the joy of the new life we have received at the hand of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Law given by Moses was good, but the life we have in Christ is

beyond compare. May we learn to delight in it as our Lord God delights in the love and praises of His people.

Well, for us today, how should we understand this miracle? What is God telling us through His Word? First, let us embrace with joy the resurrected life that we have in Christ. Let us live as new creatures. The old has passed away, the new has come. God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh, the sabbath. But Christ, in His work of redemption, altered that pattern. He died for the fallen world on the last day of creation, He slept in the grave on the old Sabbath, and then recreated the world on Sunday, the 8th day; and we are living the 8th day now. By connecting this miracle with the resurrection, God reveals to us the fullness of life in Him. We are to show forth the joy of Christ in our lives. We are to be His resurrection people. We are to embrace the gift of life and redemption in every action and attitude. Therefore we must always examine ourselves, "Are we living in the joy of the resurrection, feasting upon the fine wine of life in Jesus."

Does that mean that we do not have dangers and necessities? No, it does not. We too will run out of wine. We too might miscalculate, sin, trespass, respond in anger or without grace to a fellow human. We too will be abused, physically suffer, or be oppressed. But this raises a question. Where do we turn for help in time of need? To whom do we cry out when we are vulnerable? We turn to Jesus, and He is not deaf to our prayers.

What would have happened in this lesson had Mary not asked Jesus for help? We do not know, but they would surely have turned out much differently. In the ultimate sense, God ordained this to happen and to be recorded for us in Holy Scripture. However, Mary, in her concern for her friends and family and in Her knowledge of Jesus' origin and character, worked in concert with God to bring about this miracle. Not that she worked the miracle, but her petition to Christ was answered by Him. This is typically called the theology of second causes, and again these are mysteries into which we do not have perfect insight. But understand that our prayers matter to God because we are in a relationship with Him in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

So am I saying the God changes His mind when we pray? If our prayers make a difference, then Yes, God acts because of our prayers. And yet, No, God is still provident and our petitions are made within His ultimate knowledge and will. God is all-knowing, and exists outside of time, so He knows how things will develop. Yet God tells us to pray and delights to answer our prayers. We do have agency, and our prayers, actions, and efforts make a difference. So let us be diligent in prayer, and God, as God, has the prerogative to respond as He wills, and when He wills to His and our good pleasure. Be assured though, that God cannot answer a prayer that is never made.

Mary did not know how Jesus would respond, but she knew Jesus. Did she expect a miracle? We don't know exactly what she expected, but can conclude that she had a steady confidence that Jesus could meet their needs. So she came to Him in her time of necessity, and Jesus, who apparently would not have acted without her prayer, was pleased to intervene on her behalf for the blessing of this wedding. This miracle was both in accordance to God's ultimate plan, and also contingent upon Mary's actions.

I suspect that I have provided no real clarity to this astounding doctrine, for in it we are trying to understand the very mind of God. Ours is not to second guess what God will do, but simply to sincerely and persistently bring our petitions to God. Know that Jesus is good, He loves us, He hears us, and will answer our prayers accordingly. He brings to pass only what is best for His People, His kingdom. And indeed, He acts so that we might have life in abundance, so that our cups would overflow.

“But thou hast kept the good wine until now.” Two-buck Chuck may do in a pinch, but this is not good enough for the beloved of God. Jesus Christ will answer our prayers in a way that proves the abundance of His goodness. Be warned that we may be called upon to be the grapes that are crushed, we may be called upon to suffer, but through our prayers He will provide us with the strength to endure, and in our perseverance, His answer will be all the sweeter. Do not be discouraged. Trust in Him. He will answer our prayers according to His abundant goodness.

Finally, brothers and sisters, He does not ask us to endure anything that He Himself has not endured. Our life may be poured out for others, but this is only after Christ has poured Himself out for us. Yes, Jesus is our new wine. Jesus is the best wine. In Him, the old covenant has been fulfilled. He has been manifested to us, and we now live in the 8th day, the new day, the day of resurrection, and we enjoy the wine of salvation. His Blood and His Body is the best wine. He will help and defend us in time of need. Let us now boldly come to the table and drink of this new wine and be refreshed in body and in soul. Amen