

This beginning of signs did Jesus in Cana of Galilee

I want to talk to you for a moment about the Church. And what it means for us to be the Church. And to do that I want to start at the very beginning; with what might be called the very first Church. I want to start with the story of Adam and Eve. Because, in a way, Adam and Eve represent that first moment when God calls humanity into relationship with himself and with each other. At its most basic level, that is what it means to be the Church; to be called into relationship with God and with each other. And that's what we see in them. Literally called out of the earth; fashioned and made in God's image; and called to live together in unity and love.¹ That's what it means for us to be the Church: fashioned and made in the image of God; and called to live together in unity and love.

But we all know how the Adam and Eve story goes. Badly. So I want to fast-forward from the very first pages of Holy Scripture to the very last. From the very first chapters of the Book of Genesis to the very last chapters of the Book of Revelation. And I want to recall that image from the Book of Revelation of a new heaven and a new earth; of God's creation made new; the new Jerusalem; the heavenly city, coming down from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.² Because that, of course, is also an image of the Church. An image of the Church restored and made new. So, if the first chapters of the Book of Genesis speak to us of how the Church is marred by human sin and disobedience, then the final chapters of the Book of Revelation speak to us of how the Church is redeemed and made whole in Christ. And it's safe to say that all of the other bits of the story; all those pages between the Book of Genesis at the beginning and the Book of Revelation at the end are all about how that which was marred is mended; and of how that which was broken is made whole.

That's why, for example, in Holy Scripture we so often see the relationship between God and his people, between God and Israel, compared to the relationship between a husband and a wife; a sometimes-faithful wife but so often not. And perhaps that's why Christ so often fills his parables with images of wedding and wedding feasts: the parable of the ungrateful guests invited to a wedding banquet;³ and the parable of the wise and foolish maidens waiting for the return of the bridegroom, for example.⁴ In fact, it's not a stretch to say that the whole biblical narrative, the whole biblical story, is really a story about restoring that perfect marriage between God and his people that was lost in the Garden; restoring the perfect unity between God and his people, and the perfect unity within God's people themselves, all of which was lost because of our disobedience. So it's no coincidence, I think, that the very first miracle of Jesus' ministry; the very first sign, as John calls it in this week's Gospel, takes place at a wedding feast.⁵

¹ Genesis 2:24

² Revelation 21:2

³ St. Matthew 22:2-14

⁴ St. Matthew 25:1-13

⁵ "John's gospel is all about the marriage of heaven and earth in Jesus Christ. That is the final purpose of God in creation – not the separation of heaven and earth but their wonderfully fruitful combining."

N.T. Wright "The Hour Has Come," reprinted sermon, <http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/04/25/the-hour-has-come>.

And because weddings and wedding feasts are so central to the whole Biblical story, John's account of Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana speaks to us on at least two different levels. On one level, it's a great story about that day when Jesus saved the hosts at a wedding feast from the deep social embarrassment of running out of wine; manifesting, as we see each and every week in the Season of Epiphany, his power as God's Incarnate Son. But on another level, it's a sign at the very start of his ministry of all that Christ is going to go on to do. A kind of road map, if you will; setting a tone for his entire ministry; of how he willingly enters into the dry dust and debris of our broken and fallen world; into all of our moments of deep sorrow and shame; our moments of hunger and thirst; in order to rescue us; to raise us up; to reunite us and give us back that which we had lost.

And that's why we have that passage from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans as our Epistle. Paul gives a long list of very practical things that Christians need to do if they want to follow Christ; if they want to be the Church, using all of the gifts that God gives. For example, if you're called to be a servant, then serve. If you're in a position to give, then give with generosity. If you're called to lead, then lead with enthusiasm. If you're called to be merciful, then do so cheerfully. In each and every case Paul challenges them to use honestly the gifts that they've been given to be what God has called them to be: fervent, affectionate, patient, hospitable, joyful. And for Paul, all of these ideas hinge on just one idea: on the genuineness, the sincerity, of their love: *Let love be without dissimulation*, as we just heard. Not the pretense of love. Not a close, reasonable facsimile. Not even a very good imitation, but the real thing. Because that's what it means to be the Church. To be called into relationship with God; and into relationship with each other as the image of God. Because if humanity is ever going to live together in reconciliation and unity, it will only happen if the Church is willing to be the Church.

In this week's Gospel Jesus has nothing at all to do with the water that will become wine. He does touch it; doesn't pray over it. He only speaks to the servants and the servants obey. And, in that moment, something happens to the water, from the inside out. So the crucial role in this story is actually played by the servants; because they, too, are an image of the Church. Called by Christ; and obedient to Christ. Serving the hungry and the thirsty in the Name of Christ; in all the many different ways in which humanity can hunger and thirst; offering something better than what the world can offer. Like the servants at the wedding feast, we are called to be outward and visible signs of God's love; outward and visible signs of the power that God has to take our moments of challenge and crisis and fear and to change them from the inside out. But we cannot be the signs that God calls us to be if our love is not genuine. If our love is confused with other things that sometimes look like love but aren't. So, hear again what Paul tells us we must do if our love is to be genuine; if we are to be outward and visible signs of the power of God to take the ordinary water of everyday life and change it into something better: *Rejoice in hope... Be patient in tribulation... Be constant in prayer. ...Show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you... Rejoice with those who rejoice... Weep with those who weep. [And] live in harmony with [each] other.*