

THE MIRACLE OF CANA

• Peter Henrici •

“Yahweh’s nuptials with his people,
this eschatological nuptial mystery,
is the true ‘mystery’ of Cana.”

“Three wonders sanctify this day. Today the star guided the Wise Men to the Child in the crib. Today water became wine at the wedding feast. Today Christ our salvation was baptized in the Jordan”—thus sings the liturgy of the Church in the Office of Vespers for the sixth of January, the Feast of the Lord’s Epiphany. This threefold “today” is somewhat confusing since it encompasses a period of roughly thirty years and does not even reflect the actual chronology of events. This passage from Lauds for the Feast of the Epiphany only adds to the confusion: “Today the Church was wedded to the heavenly bridegroom. In the Jordan, Christ washed her clean of her sins. The Wise Men hurry with gifts to the wedding of the king. Water is transformed into wine and gladdens the guests.” Let us see if we can untangle this seeming confusion.

1.

One thing is clear about the liturgy’s interweaving of these three temporally distant events: the wedding at Cana has a much greater significance in the liturgy than it does in the mind of the average Christian. John’s account of Cana belongs, it is true, to the most accessible passages of the Gospel; it has a human appeal that has made it the inspiration for countless artists and poets. And yet, little notice is given to the fundamental significance for our faith of this

“mystery of the life of Jesus.” (The fact that it is not commemorated with a liturgical feast of its own is probably not the least reason for this comparative neglect.) Today, at least in Europe, Epiphany is simply the Feast of the Three Kings, a feast for children surrounded by picturesque folk customs. But even the Kings or Wise Men had a much greater importance in the first centuries of Christianity than they do at present. They are often depicted in the catacombs and on Christian sarcophagi, for pagan converts to Christianity saw these men, who had been led to Jesus by their scholarship and wisdom, as an assurance that Christ also calls the Gentiles to salvation. For this reason, the adoration of the Wise Men was understood as a first “epiphany,” as the solemn appearance of the Messiah-king in the pagan world, as a first effulgence of his divine, messianic glory.

Jesus’ glory appeared a second time thirty years later at his baptism in the Jordan, where he was certified as God’s beloved son by the descent of the Holy Spirit and the voice of the Father out of heaven. Even if we assume that these signs were perceptible only for Jesus and the Baptist, the fact remains that at this moment the Baptist testifies loud and clear to Jesus’ identity.

This second appearance of Jesus’ glory is then fulfilled in a third moment: at a wedding celebration in Cana of Galilee. There, we are told, “Jesus performed his first sign and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.” The fact that this mystery of the life of Jesus does not have a feast of its own, and that the Gospel of the wedding at Cana is read only once every three years (in Year C) is regrettable in light of today’s understanding, or rather misunderstanding, of the feast of the Epiphany. This is an additional reason to be grateful that Pope John Paul II restored the wedding at Cana to the memory of the faithful as one of the new “Luminous Mysteries” of the rosary.

2.

As a mystery of the life of Jesus, the wedding at Cana can be read on three levels. Every “mystery” is a real, experienceable occurrence in which something of God’s hidden glory comes to light—for all those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. On the first level, we can contemplate the actual occurrence of this wedding, where, so it appears, Jesus and his disciples are present by mere happenstance. The miracle of the wine, which, at the moment of its occurrence was immediately accessible only to the small group of

servants at the wedding, leads us to a deeper level. This miracle is an extraordinary, inexplicable event that points beyond itself. The divine, messianic meaning of this reference, this “sign,” is then unlocked on a third level by means of a rich symbology.

Even the immediate event itself can be properly understood only when we are cognizant of the ritual practices and theological significance of a Jewish wedding. When we do so, we realize, for example, that the wine served not only for the entertainment of the guests, but was also indispensable for the ritual itself. Above all, though, we recognize that every Jewish wedding was not only a civil act, but a religious one as well, whose rich symbolic content pointed beyond the actual event to a truth belonging to the economy of salvation. The presence of Jesus at this celebration (he may have received the invitation through Mary and/or one of his disciples) shows how unproblematically and unceremoniously he could share the life of his society and of his contemporaries. But Jesus’ presence also testifies to his high regard for the civil and religious customs of the Jewish people to which he belonged.

The miracle of the wine fits at first almost unobtrusively into this context, and yet enlarges this context at the same time. That Jesus’ performance of a miracle was by no means to be taken for granted becomes clear in the dialogue between Mary and her Son. This dialogue revolves around the *kairos*, the “hour,” in which Jesus was to begin his public activity as Messiah. Although the Gospel does not explicitly call attention to this, the transformation of water into wine is extraordinary in ways that go beyond the initial miracle itself. The huge quantity of water—between 480 and 720 liters—which the servants must laboriously and, at first sight, vainly, fetch, is transformed into an equally huge amount of wine, which is obviously of a very good quality as well. This excess at Cana points ahead to the excess of the multiplication of loaves, which is the best attested miracle of Jesus, one with an unmistakably messianic and paschal meaning.¹

The mention of bread and wine leads us to the third, symbolic level. The miracle is a “sign” that points beyond itself. It is on this level that we need to seek the most important message of the Cana account.

The wine around which the story revolves is already a sign. Wine is a gift of God that “gladdens the heart of man” (Ps 104:15).

¹See, for example, Ignace de la Potterie, “Die wunderbare Brotvermehrung,” *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift Communio* 18 (1989): 207–221.

Wine is the real symbol of God's gift of joy. For this reason, wine is part of the religious ritual of a feast, of the sabbath, of Passover, of a marriage. The prophet promises the eschatological fulfillment of God's saving work for his people using the image of an abundance of choice wine: "The lord of hosts will give a banquet on this mountain for all peoples with choice foods . . ." (Is 25:6–8).

For everyone who had ears to hear and eyes to see, the miracle of Cana was already the dawning of the messianic end times—not, as the prophet announced, before the eyes of all in proud Jerusalem, but almost hiddenly, in an insignificant hamlet in half-pagan Galilee. That the miracle was nonetheless meant as a first fulfillment of eschatological hope is underscored not only by the abundance and quality of the wine, but also by the fact that this new wine is prepared in vessels set aside for the ablutions prescribed by the Law. In other words, the water of the Old Law, whose procurement required intensive labor, is being transformed into the new wine of the nuptial joy of the Gospel—into the new wine that, we are later told, also calls for new wineskins (Mk 2:22). Christians who read the Cana account find in the wine made out of water a prefiguration of the wine of the Last Supper, in which everything comes to its fulfillment, and of that "fruit of the vine" that Jesus will no longer drink "until the Kingdom of God comes" (Lk 22:18).

The symbolic content of the miraculous transformation of wine also lends the celebration of the wedding feast a deeper significance. The messianic age that is now being ushered in must be understood as Yahweh's nuptials with his people—a marriage in which Jesus and Mary play a decisive role, and in which Jesus' disciples are also present. Even this eschatological nuptial mystery (and this is the true "mystery" of Cana) takes place in the ordinary, inconspicuous setting of a provincial country marriage between two probably very insignificant people. This one marriage, here elevated to the real symbol of the coming kingdom of God, is the foundation of the sacramentality of every Christian marriage.

Finally, we need to be sensitive to the indications of time that John has built into his narrative. There is no mistaking his reference to Jesus' "hour." This hour occurs "on the third day" (Jn 2:1), that is, on the day of God's saving intervention.² If we factor in

²See, for example, Karl Lehmann, *Auferweckt am dritten Tag nach der Schrift* (Freiburg, 1968), 176ff.

the three mentions of the “following day” that occur in the accounts of the vocation of the disciples (Jn 1:29, 35, 43), we arrive at the seventh day, which is reserved for God after the creation of the world. On this new “sabbath,” however, God no longer rests; he does something new, giving the gift of eschatological fulfillment—in the midst of time.

3.

Mary is the chief actor at Cana alongside Jesus. She sets the miracle of wine and the “revelation of Jesus’ glory” decisively in motion. She does this first in her dialogue with her Son and then in her instructions to the servants. Her words perform a double mediation: between the need of the new couple and her Son and between Jesus and the servants. In this respect, too, the narrative refers far beyond itself, especially in its mention of Jesus’ “hour.” The great patrologist Hugo Rahner offers the following description of Mary’s role in Cana:

The fact that the miraculous transformation of water into wine takes place at Mary’s request, the fact that the Lord seems at first to reject her plea with the excuse that his “hour” is not yet come, gives us a window into what is to be revealed. Mary, whom the Lord addresses as “woman,” thus referring back to the primordial revelation at the borders of lost Eden, will, when the “hour” has come, that is, when the Lord has accomplished his redemptive Passion, enter upon her office as maternal intercessor on behalf of all the faithful. From that point on, she will always be the “woman” who in truth is the mother of all the living, the Eve of the new humanity, the bearer of the body of Christ who conquers evil. John’s report that “the mother of Jesus was also there” at this wedding in Cana therefore means, when we read it in the depths of its ultimate meaning in God’s plan, that in the nuptial community for which the God-man transforms the water of human nature into the wine of divine grace, in Jesus’ table community down through the ages, the holy Church, Mary is always mother. The mystery of the Incarnation is prolonged in her, because at her maternal plea, the elect are made Jesus’ table companions.³

³Hugo Rahner, *Maria und die Kirche* (Innsbruck, 1951), 58.

4.

The almost overwhelming symbolic richness of John's account of the wedding at Cana forces the question whether we are not dealing after all with a midrash, a didactic tale, whose importance lies not in the historical truth of the event, but only in the teaching it expresses in story form. In answer, we can point out how the narrative itself plants us firmly in the ground of historical reality: "Jesus thus performed his first sign in Cana in Galilee and his disciples believed in him." What remains is not the miraculous wine, which was soon drunk up, but the faith of the disciples, the new reality that Jesus created out of the water of Old Testament humanity at the wedding of Cana. Of course, this faith must still grow and prove itself under trial. Nevertheless, it exists from the moment of that "hour," and it attests as it were retroactively to the historical reality of what happened that day in Cana.

Having said this, we encounter the "mystery" once more: the background meaning of the foreground event, which is a "sign" referring to this meaning, is not only an object but also a trigger of faith, of an existentially new way of being that is granted here to the disciples. They had already just days before converted to and begun to follow Jesus; they had already acknowledged him as Messiah. And yet it is only now that "faith" has transformed their relationship to him into something new, something deeper and hardier. For now they truly belong to, and put their trust in, him, because they have come to know who he really is—even though they will not fully understand, or be able to live from, this faith until Jesus "rises from the dead" (Jn 2:22; 12:16). The mystery is an event accessible to human experience that reveals something that cannot be directly experienced: God's hidden being. Mirroring this, faith, which cannot be reduced to human experience, places historically existing man in a connection with the hidden God that in principle cannot be dissolved. The human event of a Jewish country wedding has, through the mediation of a "sign" in the life of the disciples (in this perspective it seems to be almost a banal one), become the setting for the dawning of faith in Jesus. We are still drawing sustenance from this experience and the novelty it brings.—*Translated by Adrian J. Walker.* □

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