

A MOST IMPORTANT WEDDING¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Second Sunday after Epiphany, 20 January 2019

This morning's gospel is the well-known story of the wedding in Cana of Galilee. Cana was a sizable town nine kilometres north of Nazareth, which was just a village. I mention this because, in the immediately preceding last section of Chapter 1, Jesus has a conversation with Nathaniel, who came from Cana.² Discovering that Jesus came from Nazareth, Nathaniel says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"³ This comment, which is flippant rather than hostile, reflects the view of a person who came from the larger and more important location.⁴

When I was thinking about this sermon, I came up with two questions. The first one was the place of this story in John's gospel. His first chapter begins with a theological discussion about the Word made flesh and goes on to report on a seven-day series of events, including John the Baptist, who baptises Jesus, the calling of the disciples and the meeting with Nathaniel. Chapter 2 begins with the wedding story, which is the last of the seven-day series. After this, Jesus goes to Capernaum and then to Jerusalem where, in John's account, his public ministry starts with the cleansing of the temple, an event that, in the other gospels, is in Holy Week at the end of his ministry. My first question was how does this story fit into the week-long prelude to the public ministry? What is its role in John's gospel?

My second question arose from today's orchestral mass, which is *An English Mass* by Herbert Howells. This is the first occasion in which we will feature a mass in English. More than that, it was written for Holy Communion as found in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. This morning we will use that order, as revised in 1928. So, I looked up the BCP and found that this gospel is also the one set for this Sunday in that book. We read this gospel only in Year C, whereas the BCP read it every year but, nevertheless, why is this so?

Let's look at the second question first. Historically, the early church read only from the Hebrew scriptures, there being yet no Christian texts. As such texts became available, they were included in the readings but, at first, such usage could not have been universal. As the Christian canon of scripture became fixed, the church had, as we do now, three readings at the Eucharist. In the fifth century, however, the Old Testament reading disappeared. This left only two readings, epistle and gospel, a practice that continued until the introduction of the common lectionary after Vatican 2, in which the Old Testament reading was restored.

Cranmer thus inherited this practice of two readings from the Sarum rite, which was the form of the Catholic Mass celebrated in pre-Reformation England. Why was today's gospel read on Epiphany 2? The calendar of Cranmer's time had five Sundays after Epiphany,⁵ using each one to demonstrate the importance of Christ's "epiphany" or revelation to the Magi.

¹ Readings: Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

² John 21:2

³ John 1:46

⁴ Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2015, pp. 163-166

⁵ This calendar, which lasted up to Vatican 2, limited the Epiphany season to five Sundays or, if the date of Ash Wednesday required it, six. In that event, the readings for the fifth Sunday would be repeated. The 1662 BCP added a sixth Sunday, with proper readings, for any year when it was required. After the Epiphany season, whether five or six Sundays, came the three Sundays before Lent: Septuagesima, Sexagesima and

The wedding at Cana was read to show how Jesus, “through whom all things were made”, began to demonstrate his new creation. Ordinary water was changed to special wine. The wedding was also a prefiguring of the Eucharist, a transformative event.

This brings us to my first question: what is the place of this story in John’s gospel? We could rephrase this to ask whether or not the BCP reading interpreted it correctly.

New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham provides a useful commentary on the wedding at Cana.⁶ He notes that this event happened before Jesus began his public ministry. Almost nobody knew that it had happened at all. Certainly, the principal parties at the wedding did not. The bride and groom knew only that the steward complimented them on the quality of the wine. The steward knew only that he has a large amount of good wine to serve to the guests.

It is actually the steward who unknowingly makes the comment that reveals the significance of what has happened. He says to the bridegroom:

Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.⁷

As Bauckham comments, this statement is ironic in a sense frequently used by the author of John’s gospel.

[The steward] says something that is not true in the sense in which he means it (the bridegroom has not reserved the best wine until the last), but points to a higher truth. It is God who has “kept the good [i.e., the best] wine until now”.

The story is marked by gratuitous extravagance. Firstly, Jesus is at a wedding, not facing the poor, diseased, disabled or grieving. For some reason, poor planning or thirsty guests perhaps, the party has simply run out of wine. A significant social disgrace but hardly worthy of a miracle, you might think. They could just as easily have sent out for more.

In a sermon that he preached on this Sunday in 1995, Bauckham said:

In the end, we have to admit that Jesus isn't so much meeting a need as being rather extravagant. As Jesus' contribution to the party, if you like, he provides far more wine than they could possibly have drunk, even though such wedding celebrations traditionally went on for a whole week. And much better wine than they would normally have expected to be drinking. Luxury and extravagance are the words we have to use.⁸

Such extravagance is repeated in John’s account of the feeding of the five thousand.⁹ He reports on the large amount of bread left over from such small beginnings as five barley loaves. Both the Cana wedding and the feeding story carry eucharistic implications: so much wine, so much bread, so generous a reception from God.

Quinquagesima. These terms represented 70, 60 and 50 days before Easter Day. Quinquagesima was 50 days before Easter, but the two other days were only 64 and 57 respectively, so the terms were not overall precise. These days have now been dropped from the calendar and our Epiphany season goes up to Ash Wednesday. This year, there are eight such Sundays.

⁶ Bauckham, pp. 180-183

⁷ John 2:10

⁸ Richard Bauckham, “Water into Wine”, a sermon preached at St Salvator’s Chapel, St Andrews University, 15 January 1995. <http://richardbauckham.co.uk/uploads/Sermons/Water%20into%20Wine.pdf>

⁹ John 6:1-14

Many commentators on this gospel passage refer to the rather cynical words of the Danish philosopher theologian, Søren Kierkegaard:

Christ turned water into wine, but the church has succeeded in doing something even more difficult: it has turned wine into water.¹⁰

Here, Kierkegaard refers to the trivialisation and dumbing down of the words and actions of Jesus. We have just come through that process with the popular presentation of the Christmas story. But, as Bauckham says, however much things are trivialised, they still represent the ordinary qualities of people:

Jesus, the guest at the marriage feast, does not reject these qualities of everyday, ordinary life; he shares them; he appreciates them; he enhances them; he gives them new vitality. And so even those who've been quite happy with the ordinary wine they've enjoyed up till now, find the wine they taste last much better than they could ever have expected.¹¹

This morning, we are reminded first that God has been revealed as the bringer of a new creation. And second that, in that creation, we are to find life abundant, more abundant than either we expect or deserve.



¹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, ed. and trans. by Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: University Press, 2009), p. 37

¹¹ Bauckham, Sermon