

From Jacob's ladder to the wedding at Cana and back again

Stanley L. Jaki

No greater honor has ever been accorded to a wedding than to the one that took place in Cana. Yet unknown is the name of the young couple who were honored by the presence of the Incarnate God. They were also honored by the presence of Mary to whom we owe the Incarnation and even the fact that their wedding witnessed a truly extraordinary event which is tied forever to the name of that little village.

Much is contained in each small detail about that wedding in the sole source of information about it, the Gospel of Saint John. Take the six large stone jars. Not that any of them had survived right on that spot. But the little church, built centuries later in Cana, and rebuilt again and again, surely reminds the modern visitor there that Christians recall very fondly the event that took place in Cana two thousand years ago.

Our materialistic times may especially be intrigued by the amount of water, more than one hundred gallons, that turned into wine in a split second. Only the waiters witnessed what happened. The master of ceremonies merely noticed that until then not a drop had been served of that wine, which he found to be of excellent quality. But, as in other occasions as well, Jesus saw to it that his miracles be really noticed only by those to whom he had especially meant them. In this case they were his freshly recruited five apostles, or Andrew, John, Peter, Philip, and Natanael. This was the order in which they had joined Jesus three or four days earlier. As one of them, John, recalled, on seeing that the water miraculously turned into wine, they believed in Jesus.

As to the quantity of the water turned wine there can be little doubt about it, because, as John himself noted, each of those stone containers could hold two to three measures of water. And since each measure corresponded to about eight gallons, it is easy to estimate the total volume of those six containers.

If each of the guests there was given at least one cup of that wine, it is easy to calculate that there must have been several hundreds of them. This number may also be guessed from that fact that it was customary to invite for a wedding

almost everybody from the neighboring villages. For almost everybody was the second or third cousin of everyone else in the general area. A fair picture of village weddings then and there may be gained from the painting called "Kermesse" by the 16th-century Dutch painter, Brueghel. Only the colorful dresses of men should be replaced with long white robes. Apart from this very similar must have been the activities. Among these there was the roasting of some sheep and the fragrance of the meat filled the neighborhood.

The immediate surroundings of the village, which lay at the northern foot of a hill, were not as barren at that time as today, but they were not luscious green either. There was no lake there, not even a few brooks, and certainly no river. But even if the Jordan had been flowing nearby, the wedding would not have been moved to the riverbank, surely a great lure in a hot and dry climate. The wedding had to be connected with the homes of the families of the bride and of the groom. The bride was taken from one home to the other, and the presence of their families in that act was what made the wedding official.

But by being present at the wedding, Jesus introduced a great change. The Christian marriage was to become not only a matter for the two families, but a matter of the new great family, consisting of countless households, a family known as the Church. Not surprisingly the wedding at Cana became the archetype of Christian wedding. And partly because Mary was present at Jesus' side and because what happened did happen at Mary's initiative, at Vatican II Pope Paul VI declared Mary to be the Mother of the Church.

As we read in the Gospel, it fell to Mary to call her Son's attention to the fact that the wine had run short. Here too, as elsewhere in the Gospel, Mary presence is very tactful, not meant to make a big impression externally. But whatever she does, carries a great interior significance. She spoke quietly to her Son, who first showed Himself reluctant to act on the ground that His time had not yet arrived. In fact, Jesus as a rule refrained from doing or saying anything unless the time and the place suited His own purpose. But then, and only then, when Jesus seemed to refuse to do something requested by Mary, He did something which refutes what so many so often and so erroneously had been read into his reply to Mary: "Is it our business, woman? My hour has not yet come." Such a reply clearly was not a dismissal, it could not mean that Jesus sidelined Mary. That Mary did not take it in that sense, is clear from her words to the waiters: "Do what he tells you to do."

Jesus was a great strategist. He came with the greatest conceivable strategy, which aimed at awakening us to the fact that in him the Messiah had truly arrived. Included in that strategy was also his intention to disclose the enormous role which the woman known as Mary played in his life and therefore was to play in the entire salvation history. She became not only the best known woman in history, a fact aptly conveyed in the title, *Alone of all her sex*, of a book written in the Eighties. No wonder. As in the rest of salvation history Mary played here too a

key role. The entire history of Christianity shows that wherever Mary is venerated, faith in Jesus' divinity remains strong, whereas wherever that veneration has died out, all too often this meant the end of that faith as well.

That faith rests on Jesus' miracles which had their beginning in Cana, and at Mary's suggestion. Mary knew the kind of divine power hidden in her Son. He took flesh in her womb with no effort on the part of a man. As a newborn he attracted three wise men from the East. As an infant he outwitted Herod. As a twelve-years old he instructed the elders in the Temple, and yet remained obedient to Mary and Joseph, as he grew in wisdom, knowledge, and grace before God and men.

Further details in John's account of the wedding at Cana are no less instructive. The wedding took place exactly three days after Jesus had been baptized in the Jordan. The next day Jesus recruited Simon, son of Jonah, in addition to Andrew and John, as his first apostles. Jesus declared right then and there that Simon would be called rock or Peter. On that rock was Jesus to raise his church, against which the powers of hell would not prevail. Two thousand years have served many illustrations of this in spite of the fact, to mention only one example, that Churchill and Roosevelt remained speechless when Stalin asked them about the number of the popes' divisions. Another pope was greatly instrumental in putting an end, and with no reliance on a single division, to the evil empire.

In the morning of the second day of his public mission, as Jesus was setting out to Cana in Galilee where he was invited to a wedding, he saw Philip and recruited him as his apostle by telling him: "Follow me." With the enthusiasm of a young recruit Philip wanted to bring along his friend Natanael, who, however, was reluctant: "What good can come from Nazareth?" he asked Philip, meaning that Nazareth, a God forsaken hamlet, could hardly be the hometown of the Messiah. Still he made the brief journey to see Jesus.

On encountering Jesus, Natanael quickly understood that the Rabbi from Nazareth had eyes that saw through hedges and woods, vale and dale, all sorts of screens, all kinds of cover-ups. Natanael could only be stunned when Jesus described him as one sitting under the fig tree that could not be seen from the place where Jesus was, perhaps because that tree was just behind the nearest bend of a hill. Natanael was disarmed and exclaimed: "Rabbi you are the son of God, the King of Israel." But Jesus quieted him down: "Just because I said that I saw you under a fig tree, you believe? You will see greater things than that." Then he turned to his little group of apostles: "Amen I say to you, you will see the sky open and God's angels ascend and descend on the Son of Man."

On hearing this, Natanael and the others could think of only one thing: Jacob patriarch's vision in which a ladder reached from the earth to the heaven and angels moved up and down on it. Undoubtedly they were embellishing in their minds this vision as they were walking from the banks of Jordan to Cana, a march

of about two days. During such a journey it was possible to discuss to no end what Jesus meant by the sky's opening up, but they could hardly doubt that insofar as they cast their lot with Jesus they would be part of something truly magnificent.

Although such a God-forsaken hamlet as Cana could not appear the fitting local for such a magnificent event, there was in Cana a wedding, where the possibly magnificent could readily be tied to the actually enjoyable. But pleasant as it could be to think of the wedding meal, it is safe to assume that the central concern for Natanael and the others was to figure out how they could secure for themselves the highest possibly rung on a ladder reaching to the sky. We know that, like the Jews of their time, Natanael and the rest expected a glory on earth with the coming of the Messiah. They could hardly think of what was the deeper meaning of Jacob's vision and what was really the nature of the sky Jacob saw open up.

Jacob could at least understand from his vision that his life on earth was subject to some higher destiny, namely that his descendants may serve with their history as a preparation for the Messiah's coming. But Jacob could not think that among his descendants would belong also such who did not descend bodily from him.

Jesus came precisely to convince everybody about the higher destiny of human life, a destiny independent of the racial or national aspects of one's descent. Still Jesus left the idea of bodily descent in the center, He himself became man through a woman. No wonder that Jesus began his public mission by appearing at a wedding. He did not choose a session of a Scientific Academy for his first public appearance. In that case he might have chosen to become man in Athens and not in Nazareth which in all likelihood did not even have an elementary school. Jesus did not choose for the scene of his first public appearance the solemn opening of a Parliament because for all its prominence such an event is only the business of a relatively few. Jesus did not go to the headquarters of the United Nations, because it is only a superstructure. Without individuals there are no nations, either united or disunited. Jesus wanted to save mankind by gaining each and every individual. He therefore went to a wedding as ordinary as there could be one a run-of-the-mill hamlet like Cana. Although Jesus came to save all men, he knew that nothing is so much at the heart of any a human being as is a wedding, no matter where it is celebrated.

For man's destiny to propagate mankind nowhere appears so forcefully as at a wedding. Wedding, which is the contracting act of marriage, is the occasion where a man and a woman obligate themselves to accept their service to a bond. The word "bond" conveys powerfully the nature of that obligation. The bond is an obligation that binds one and does it most seriously.

Life is inseparable from that bond and from the commitment to serve that bond unreservedly and regardless of whether it pleases one or not. Indeed, if pleasure is

looked for in a service, the service eventually becomes unbearable. Exactly the same is true of the marriage bond. This is precisely the point which Jesus meant to stress by appearing at the wedding at Cana. With his presence he put a most seriously stamp on an otherwise merry occasion. Since that time wedding or marriage has become a commitment in the service of life's higher destiny through securing continuation to the human race.

All service has an appropriate means whereby it can be implemented. In case of marriage the means is called grace, the supernatural gift of God to man. This gift has the sacraments for its channel.

Marriage is a sacrament or an external sign that conveys an inner reality. Here the sign is the solemn declaration of two human beings that they commit themselves in love to serve one another until death parts them. This declaration is an external sign that conveys the inner grace of the sacrament of marriage.

The sacrament of marriage is therefore very special among all the sacraments. Nobody can baptize himself or herself. Nobody can do similarly with confirmation. Nobody can hear one's own confession. Nobody can administer to oneself the last rites. Nobody can ordain oneself a priest. Even the priest, strictly speaking, can offer the mass only on behalf of the Church and not in his own behalf.

But the sacrament of marriage is administered by the two parties through their making that declaration. They, however, make that declaration in the presence of a priest, the official representative of the Church. It is in this way that Christ makes them understand that he wants to honor every Christian marriage with his presence.

Marriage is a sacrament because Jesus is present in its administration, just as he is also present whenever any of the sacraments is administered. The grace he gives is special to each sacrament. The special grace of the sacrament of marriage is the wondrous means whereby each act of married love becomes another rung in the ladder stretching across the full span of life, a ladder which both for the husband and the wife ought to reach from earth to heaven.

Although nowadays a house, an edifice, can be put together from prefabricated parts, this is not the case with the construct called marriage. Marriage is an edifice which ought to be created by the parties concerned, and by the acts, small and great, of their marital love. Marriage is a task for the entire span of life. To carry out this task God's grace is required at every moment, at every hour, through each and every year. In each moment of every day there is need of a form of love which is not a slogan, a phrase, a sentiment, but the forbearance of one another, faith placed in one another, and mutual acceptance of any trial. To cope with this one needs that kind of divine help which is called grace. The source of that grace is the sacrament of marriage.

This grace is a kind of deposit made by God, a deposit wholly gratuitous, that

is, unmerited. To draw from that deposit one needs not a credit card, but prayer. This deposit will be productive in the measure in which prayer will animate the lives of both husband and wife.

Included in that prayer is that both husband and wife renew, at least mentally, every day their commitment to one another, and not only for days of sunshine but also for days overcast by the clouds of trials, of which there is a plenty in each and every marriage. Only such a renewal of the marital commitment will assure that the ladder stretching towards the heaven would rise ever higher, because it will have ever more rungs.

Such is the meaning of Christian marriage, symbolized by the turning of water into wine at Cana. Christian marriage is a sacrament, a source of heavenly strength, that turns the daily trials of life into a blessing, into a superior wine, which, unlike ordinary wine, does not lose its taste, and never turns into sour, bitter vinegar. The strength of that wine comes from the words, which Jesus pronounced over the bread and wine at the Last Supper. He then made it possible that his very body and blood may become food and drink for us, which alone assure eternal life.

This body and blood were given to us through Mary. May she stay by your side in the same way as she stood by her Son at the wedding of Cana, so that He would provide for the needs of those there. May that Mary stand by you with that kindness and tactfulness as she did that at the wedding of Cana. This way will you serve each other's needs and become truly undemanding which is the secret of true happiness.

Of course, the happiness in question is the kind which serves long term designs, the entire term of life. During it there will be many occasions to find that only faith in eternal life provides a sense of purpose which endures in any circumstance.

Love, which manifests itself above all in patience and sacrifice, will assure for you this kind of sense of purpose. It is the genuine love which Saint Paul described in the reading [1Cor 13] so that there should remain no doubt as to the kind of love to be had in mind. This love will make you see, as your life goes on, that the heaven above you will open up ever more convincingly. It will be resplendent in the rays of good conscience, in the light of your awareness that you have done your God-given duty, which alone gives meaning and goal to life. Then you will see the Son of Man approach you in his glory, who once turned up at the side of a newly married couple. He will approach you from the top of the ladder you yourself have built for him with your daily sacrifices, so that you may ascend toward him and be led by him into his eternal glory.

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