

The Wedding in Cana of Galilee

Matthew the poor

THIS FEAST is considered as one of the feasts of Divine Epiphany which the Church used to celebrate all together as one feast: The Nativity, the Visit of the Magi, Circumcision, Epiphany, and the Wedding in Cana of Galilee.

Also concerning this feast of the Lord, St Epiphanius Bishop of Cyprus, AD 315-403, has casually hinted at the concern of the Coptic Church, since the earliest times, in observing this feast along with Epiphany. He says:

The Coptic Church observes the feast of the Wedding in Cana of Galilee on the eleventh of Toubah (together with Epiphany). The people believe in the possibility of transforming the water of the springs and that of the Nile into wine through simple and sincere faith, as an annual memorial of Christ's miracle.¹

Cana in Galilee is 6 miles north east of Nazareth, a two-hour walk. The Virgin Mary went before Jesus and his disciples as was the custom for the women to attend the marriage (which extended for 7 days) from the beginning.

As usual, Jesus comes at the right time (just as soon as all the wine had been drunk). He comes with only a few of his disciples, since they had not yet reached their full number; (it had only been 3 days since Nathanael was called and Philip a little earlier, 4 days since the call of Andrew and Peter, and only a week since John had changed from following John the Baptist to following Jesus).

Therefore, the number of the disciples on the day of the wedding could not have exceeded that of the fingers of a hand.

This miracle was the first sign to mark the inauguration of Christ's ministry after His Baptism. It was also the first to correspond to the ministry of John the Baptist, as it gives the clearest conception of Jesus "the Son of Man". For here is a man who baptizes with water, practicing asceticism and total abstinence from wine, living in the wilderness; yet, here is Another who begins by the wedding in Cana of Galilee, transforming water into wine.

It is noteworthy that this miracle inherently brings out the transformation from water—the capital stock of John the Baptist—as a power of purification and change through repentance and behavior, to Christ Himself as an exceedingly greater power to transform the very essence of human nature and its subsequent behavior. For Christ here, when subjecting water and transforming it into what is not water through the power of his word, explicitly and forcefully points out that the power for being able to change, repent, rejoice and find comfort, which all mankind craves, originally exists in Christ and in His word.

Moreover, this miracle implies that wine, in the presence of Christ, is no longer the source of refreshment and change of mood from depression into joy and jubilation. For now we have a more effective source, namely Christ who actually creates the very nature of wine and

subsequently all of its power or even more! “For your love is better than wine” (Song of Songs 1:2).

The focus in this miracle is upon one word: Christ as the source of “transformation”. In His first sign and at the beginning of His ministry, Jesus calls our attention to the fact that He has come to be the exclusive “source of transformation” in man’s life. So it is not through asceticism or seclusion in the wilderness; not through acts of ablution with water and supplication; not through Elisha, John or the prophets, but in Christ Himself that the transformation of man is effected just as the water was mystically transformed through neither prayer, supplication, nor any other act to become what is not water, but good new wine which man wrongly thought would give him comfort.

The significance of the Wedding in the Hebrew tradition:

Wedding rituals in the original Hebrew tradition and the celebrations that accompany them had a much deeper significance than merely being a marriage party or an occasion or social event for amusement and exchanging expressions of good will. What we cite here for the reader about the Hebrew wedding traditions in the days of Christ is taken from the Talmud and the ancient books of Jewish rituals as presented to us by a Rabbi who converted to Christianity.² In short the wedding was considered a point of decision in the life of the young couple who fasted and confessed their sins before the wedding. In the Hebrew tradition, marriage was considered a “mystery”, so much so that as soon as it was contracted all of the couple’s previous sins were automatically forgiven.

In the book of Genesis we have an actual representation of this significance. The wife of Esau whose name before marriage was “Basma” which is in Hebrew pronounced “Basemath” (Gen 36:3), was called after the wedding: “Mohalla” which is correctly pronounced in Hebrew “Mahallath” (Gen 28:9) which means “whose sins have been forgiven.”

It was well known that the relationship between the bride and the bridegroom was typologically that which existed between Jehovah and His people as a whole! This is repeated again and again in the Bible, so much so that it has become part and parcel of the teaching of the Rabbis. Thus the union of the bride and the bridegroom on the wedding day was, as far as the people understood it, based on the relationship between God and Israel.

In the Scriptures, God is portrayed ten times as the Bridegroom whose bride is the people. This occurs 6 times in the Song of Songs, 3 times in the book of Isaiah, and once in the book of Jeremiah.

Therefore, the fact that the people and their leaders made a point of attending a wedding emanated from the concept of their participation in deepening the sense of the mystical union between God and His people, and honoring the existence and fulfillment of God’s promises as to the flourishing of the nation.

In this sense, the wedding ceremony was very carefully planned, and the rich and the members of the synod provided for the means of enjoyment if the couple were poor; for that was considered a sign of honoring the relationship that binds God to the synod and the people.

Accordingly, the wedding rituals, which were imbued with reverence, piety and a religious sense, permeated the wedding party itself from the very beginning to the very end, this being a sacred party which included jubilation, joy, dancing, clapping and drinking of wine (which had been blessed by prayer).³

At the religious level, all these acts were not in the least marred by any licentious blemish, but were only acts in honor of the Lord “Jehovah”.

Even the mere engagement which precedes the marriage and which we now call Ja Peniot in Coptic, i.e. “Our Father which art in heaven...” was named in Hebrew ‘arousein qadosheen (the holy bride and groom); i.e. the initiation of the couple into holiness! And when any of the officers or priests stood up to describe the beauty of the bride and enumerate her virtues, it was considered as part of the holy ceremony!

All this makes it sound reasonable for Christ to attend the wedding of a poor couple who “have no wine” for this was part and parcel of His mission as a veritable bridegroom to every soul—especially that it was His first act supported by a sign. Whereas attending a wedding was considered a religious service and duty to be observed by every Israelite or every zealous person, for Jesus it was considered a sort of re-evaluation of the significance of the wedding in the New Covenant; for in the presence of Christ God attended the wedding! Thus, ever since the wedding in Cana of Galilee and up to the present day, Christian marriage has borne the stamp of the “Divine Mystery”. A mystery wherein the sacramental concept of matrimony is confined within the sense of “Christ’s presence” which upholds it by making the nuptial bond involve three parties, not two: “What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matt 19:6).

It is Christ in every marriage who establishes the promise and warrants the covenant between spouses so as to change life from a temporal ordinary level, into an immortal and eternal one, through the mystery of God’s presence, being thus analogous to the transformation of the water into wine.

When Jesus made a point of inaugurating His ministry and revealing His glory at a wedding, He was actually making use of the occasion and the sign to point to the consummation of His ministry. He will invite us all to attend His own wedding “the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rev 19:9), when we shall be the center of this wedding, our place being that of the bride: “For I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband” (2 Cor 11:2).

Thus the sign at the Wedding in Cana of Galilee implicitly draws our attention to the real role of Jesus both at Cana and in our own lives; for He is the veritable Bridegroom wherever He happens to be; and we are always with Him wherever He is and wherever we are, as a bride always accompanying her groom. In other words the wedding in Cana is our own wedding and the bridegroom is our own Bridegroom, and our soul is the bride.

O my soul! When shall you realize where you belong in the manger and the Jordan, in Cana and at the cross, in the sepulcher and in heaven?

The Miracle:

The Virgin Mary intentionally announced her Son to the world as the Messiah. She was trying impatiently to declare His glory, for she was completely certain of it. She was extremely eager to find the opportunity to share with the whole of Israel what she had known with certitude about the mystery of Christ, the hope of all ages.

But the good-hearted Virgin was not aware that the starting point of Christ's revelation was also itself the beginning of the appearance of the phantom of the cross, and that the very day His glorious nature was revealed was the beginning of the down count to Passion Week!

“O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come” (John 2:4). How more fitting were it, in the eyes of Jesus, for the Virgin to have kept away from the path of the cross! How more needful were it for her, in His eyes, not to become an instrument to hasten about the sword which would pierce through her soul when seeing Him on the cross!

However, because of her absolute faith and trust in Him, and on account of the special esteem in which He held her, He did not reject her solicitation. He accorded her request though after a brief reproof; and thus began His glory, together with His Passion, at one and the same time!!

In order to clear away the mystery which envelops the way the Lord addresses her (“O woman”), we should understand that Christ speaks here as God, for He is about to work a miracle of supernatural creation; in other words the Son of God is here addressing a human mother!!

Thus Christ is eloquently indicating to the Virgin that He has come into His divine sphere to begin His supreme ministry which by no means admits the counsel of a woman or any human being. At the age of 12 He had once told her, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” (Lk 2:49). But now He has entered forever into His mystic relation with the Father where the only counsel is from the Father and from no one else!

Likewise, we cannot let pass lightly the way the Holy Virgin expressed her request: “They have no wine” (John 2:3). Here the very request is actually a prayer, a prayer which may be the shortest recorded in the Holy Bible and the most confident, the most assured and the most faithful.

We wish that our prayers were thus so very concise, and so very confident, and merely a realistic presentation of the situation, “They have no wine.”

In spite of Christ's verbal response which almost means a renunciation or at least a denunciation of her request, the Holy Virgin knew very well the depth of Christ's meekness. She remained unwaveringly confident that He would meet the needs of the people. This confidence was based on her experience with Him for 30 years, “Do whatever He tells you” (John 2:5). This shows the extent of her confidence in His infinite power, and how fully she understands His absolute readiness to respond favorably to prayer.

Water of Ablution:

The water here is meant for purification through washing the hands, the cups, and jugs, and the copper plates. There were six jars of stone and not seven which means that they were to be used up during the six week days only, but the 7th—the Sabbath—the day of rest, would not allow the act of purification. The capacity of each stone jar was equal to that of two to three five-gallon cans, and so it would be the same size as a small, present-day clay jar.⁴

In the purification water, Jesus finds the proper source for performing the miracle, and for putting an end to the significance of the formal purification, for all of the water was transformed into wine. Now there was no more water in the jars and consequently the stage of purification with water in the life of humanity came to an end.

The wine in the wedding festival jars here covertly signifies its close relationship with the Last Supper wine offered as the blood to be shed on the cross for the true purification through the remission of sin.

The transformation of the purification water into wine here, is a preliminary process which Jesus brought to perfection at the Last Supper by transforming the wine into veritable blood for the remission of sins.

Therefore, by transforming all of the purification water into wine, Jesus was actually insinuating that He Himself was the true source of purification: “When He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb 1:3).

Similarly, the act of transforming water into wine as the initial miraculous act at the beginning of His ministry of salvation, was actually a process of overwhelming stimulation to the minds of those who were longing for the salvation of Israel.

Here the age of Moses has come back again, the age of salvation: The age of Moses who transformed the water in the rivers of Egypt into blood, and Moses who also at the beginning of his ministry manifested through himself God’s power and glory so that his people might believe in him and respond to the act of salvation to which he was to lead them. That is why the Gospel according to John refers to this implicitly by saying, “...and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him” (John 2:11).

Here we should draw the attention of researchers to the fact that John the beloved was the only one to record this incident in his Gospel. The reason for this is quite clear because the disciples had not reached their full number at the time the miracle was performed. For those who witnessed this miracle were about five disciples, the first of whom was John. It is well known that besides being an eye witness, John the Apostle was the only one to know the details of the private conversation that took place between Jesus and the Virgin due to the fact that the Virgin stayed with John in his house for a long time after the crucifixion, and she was the one who informed him of all those things.

Moreover the reader should be aware of the wonderful mystical style of John the Apostle’s Gospel. He relates the conversation, and the incident and the miracle quite simply although his objectives were extremely deep and sublime. Throughout his report on the incident John aims at stressing two very important points: The first is about Jesus as the true bridegroom manifested

through the “Messiah’s banquet.” The second is about the “good wine”, i.e. the Eucharist, the Sacrament of the Church, and the pivot point of salvation and redemption.

Right from the beginning the Church was aware of the mystical background of the incident of the wedding at Cana. So the Church in its teaching and icons, has related this miracle at Cana of Galilee (when the wine gave out) to that of the five loaves, the two fish (the hungry crowds), as the Gospel’s realistic, living interpretation of the spiritual concept of the Eucharist based on faith and belief.

In the miracle of the wedding the concept of “transformation” is brought into focus at the deepest and clearest level of interpretation. Whereas in the miracle of the five loaves what is brought into focus is the concept of the infinite and the boundless in the mystery of the bread (the body) wherein the resulting satisfaction and the left over immeasurably exceed the tangible and visible original.

It is noteworthy that the motive for both miracles was need and hunger and the reference here is to the inner state. The need for wine signifies the need for the Holy Spirit for consolation, joy, relief from worry and gloom. Extreme hunger refers to the need for the “Flesh” which is the Word that is true food for life everlasting. Being the real source of full joy and satisfaction, Jesus is there in both cases to meet our needs. He would not ever like us to get joy and satisfaction from the market, the worldly market however rich we may be!! “Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread...” (John 6:7).

Similarly, the concentration on transforming the purification water to “new” wine at the wedding should not let us miss why Jesus chose to make the first reference to the New Covenant at the wedding at Cana. “For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

John’s Gospel does not relate the incident without a wonderful intuitive introduction. Thus he begins as follows, “On the third day there was a marriage at Cana” (John 2:1).

The active spiritual mentality cannot possibly read this hint and miss the intention of the Gospel. Literally, the third day at the beginning of this chapter means nothing, but regarding Jesus and the church as a whole, and according to the prophecies of the Old Testament it signifies the resurrection.

Thus, the Holy Spirit puts the whole incident of the wedding at Cana along side “the glory” of the resurrection: in John’s Gospel Jesus actualizes His resurrection right at the beginning of His ministry. And the Christian is admitted to the glory of the resurrection with “people of the wedding” immediately after baptism. And in accordance with the ritual, the Church considers Jesus its own bridegroom not from the beginning of His baptism, but from the moment He assumed the name of “Jesus” the Redeemer of His people on the day of His circumcision, which is the ritual qualification of the bridegroom. Therefore the Church calls Jesus her true bridegroom, according to the ritual, the Church being the “wife of the Lamb”—Jesus Himself—to redeem and sanctify her and now she is “adorned for Him” (Rev 21:2, 9).

Circumcised and bridegroom are synonyms in Aramaic which Jesus used, “ ‘You are a bridegroom of blood’ because of the circumcision” (Ex 4:26).

The emphasis in the incident at Cana of Galilee is on the wedding to point out where Jesus sets out on His ministry, namely at a wedding ceremony, to declare Himself as a source of joy to humanity and also to point out His office as a bridegroom for the redeemed humanity.

Likewise John the Baptist sets out on his ministry as far as Jesus is concerned by referring to Him as a bridegroom and to himself as the bridegroom’s friend: “as one who drinks wine (spiritually) with the participants in the wedding, i.e., as one sharing in a heavenly wedding and not ‘as the bridegroom or the source of joy’.” The transforming of the water into good wine refers to supplanting the sorrows of humanity and the sweat of its labor and toil by true joy: “He who has the bride is the bridegroom, the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full” (John 3:29).

Therefore, to us, the wedding in Cana of Galilee is our new life, as the source of the true, everlasting joy: our joy endlessly springs from “the bridegroom’s voice”, when He gives His orders every day for our water and tears to be transformed into good wine, not in big jars, but in a “chalice”, as satisfaction and fullness are now at the spiritual and sacramental level.

Every Sunday the Church celebrates a wedding as though it were dwelling in Cana of Galilee.

Moreover, the Gospel according to John concentrates on the fact that Jesus does not start the miracle from a void or from a sphere more distant from, or more sublime or less elevated than our world. He did not create the wine from nothing; as He had previously refused to transform the stone into bread (cf Matt 4:3).

It is our very water that is “transformed” just as it is our very bread that brings in the “blessing”. The main point here is to evaluate the significance and the style of our life with God within the context of the new covenant, not on the basis of eradicating or canceling the material substance or considering it beneath us, but on the basis of transforming it to something new and real; not on the basis of belittling the limitations of what exists, but rather on the basis of augmenting it incomprehensibly and infinitely through the sacrament of the Eucharist and Benediction. Jesus fully exists in the sacrament of the Blessing and completely in the sacrament of Grace, “And from His fullness have we all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16). “So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten” (John 6:13).

The water which the Jews used for partial and local cleansing at the level of the hand and the cup, is what Jesus transformed for us into Evangelical wine, which is the basis of the mystery of the blood and redemption that purges the conscience of the whole world.

The bread of sweat and tears which the two lads had with them on their short trip across Lake Tiberias was the same that Jesus took in His hands and blessed, and made a source of satisfaction and overflowing abundance for the whole world, since that day and forever, “the food which endures to eternal life” (John 6:27).

Unlike the gift of the world, the splendor and excellence of the bounty of Jesus always become clear in the end. “Every man serves the good wine first, ... but you have kept the good wine until now” (John 2:10).

It is not by accident that John’s Gospel relates that it was in the presence of the Virgin Mary that Jesus began His ministry at the wedding in Galilee, and consummated it in her presence at the cross; for he himself (John) witnessed both incidents with her, for he was Christ’s most intimate disciple, whereas she is the bridegroom’s mother in the first place and of course the partaker of His joy and Passion; for His glory in His joy and His glory in His Passion are inseparable as He is glorified in the one and by the other.

It was at the wedding in Cana that He manifested His glory and on the cross that He perfected it.

At the wedding in Cana as well as in the sorrows at Bethany was He glorified!! Thus Jesus is our glory in joy and sorrow alike! For glory follows Jesus wherever He goes.

He manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him

The commentators were perplexed, what constitutes His glory in the sign of transforming the water into wine? Is it the miracle itself? Or is it the circumstances in which it was performed? If it was the miracle itself then His disciples were the only ones who have believed in Him and subsequently the miracle was not enough to amaze anyone other than those who were intimate with Him. As regards the circumstances in which the miracle was performed, they were nothing more than social participation the next of kin and the clerics were supposed to observe. So, how did Jesus manifest His glory to His disciples in this sign that they believed in Him?

Here we have to understand that whatever God does requires an ear capable of hearing and an eye capable of seeing. The disciples’ ears were sensitive and their eyes were wide open and ready for perception, for the whole of their relationship with Christ was no more than one week old. Therefore, the master was being closely scrutinized, and carefully observed in most hopeful expectation. The disciples were ready to perceive the least of any outstanding movement and interpret any supernatural act, all of which was made possible by keen receptivity.

Therefore, when they saw with their very eyes the water as it was being poured into the jars before them and then saw the very same water as it was drawn out of the jars, having been transformed into wine which they then tasted and made sure that it was real wine, the miracle was worked instantly: the miracle of their belief rather than that of transforming the water into wine!! They completely believed in Jesus!! In this—they saw the most of whatever they could hope for or imagine: namely their Master breaking the boundaries of concrete substance. Lo, this was the Messiah for sure and beyond any doubt. All His sweet words and illuminating previous teachings reflected His supernatural power!!

Therefore, the sign at the wedding in Cana of Galilee was the first sign of the glory of their Master and the greatest of all in the lives of the first five disciples, especially that of John!!

How greatly in need were the disciples, and how greatly are we in need of this level of receptivity and keen perception so that we can trace whatever Jesus does in our lives and in our world. Every single day He transforms everything before us and everything in our lives, but what we stand badly in need of is the ear that can hear and the eye that can see!

Not only the burning bush of Moses—but every tree as well is ablaze with divine fire without being burnt. Only those who have their eyes open can see and take off their shoes!!

Every single day our water is transformed into wine which in turn develops into holiness and everlasting life—and only those who abide at close quarters in expectation can see and savor the Lord and rejoice!

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1 Epiphanius. *Contra Heeresis* 1, I, c. 30; I, 451, ed. Petavius.

2 Edersheim *Life of Jesus* I, p. 352.

3 It is noteworthy that the Jewish people were by nature not fond of drunkenness, and the wine used in Palestine was ordinary undistilled wine, unlike strong alcoholic drink.

4 Drinking water is still often kept in clay jars in Egypt.