John 2: 1-11; *Revelation* 21: 1-5a; *Isaiah* 62: 1-5 (5/8/22)

THROUGH JESUS, NEW LIFE

Wine described with the word "good" in our gospel reading this morning had the qualities of new wine—recently-fermented juice that tasted fresh and was of optimum alcohol content. Because of the way wine was stored, in skins or in jars with clay stoppers, it wasn't possible to keep it "alive" for very long. Over only a couple years, it would become vinegar—"wine vinegar" of the kind that, soaking a sponge, was lifted up to Jesus's lips as he suffered on the Cross (*John* 19: 28-30). It's likely that the master of the banquet pronounced the wine Jesus made out of water "good" because, on tasting it, he could tell immediately that it was lively—sweet and potent. What the master of the banquet says to the bridegroom, exclaiming, "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," suggests—in an ironical way, perhaps, to our ears—that the bridegroom and his family were not prepared to host a respectable feast—either because they were parsimonious or because they in fact lacked resources. Guests had come to a wedding feast with the expectation that it would be the typical

affair—seven days or more of eating, drinking, socializing, and dancing—the less lively, perhaps rather sour-tasting wine coming toward the end, when everyone was too tired to care. But here, at this particular wedding, the wine, even at the beginning of the celebration, has been inferior and, what is worse, in short supply.

When his mother tells Jesus that a meager supply of wine has run out, Mary probably speaks softly. This unexpected development should cause the groom's family deep embarrassment. The celebration is not at all what it was supposed to be. To appreciate the disappointment wedding guests would experience when news that the wine supply had been exhausted went around, we need to appreciate what a wedding feast symbolized. With a marriage, there was the celebration of Community. A marriage signified the on-going prospects for a community, the life of which would be extended by yet another generation. We can readily understand this level of signification. Even today, though communities are not very tightly-knit, we value marriage and marriage celebrations on this level. But for the people of Israel, throughout the history of the nation, the meaning of a sumptuous, lengthy celebration had another—a *theological*—layer. A proper wedding feast

signified God's love and care, inasmuch as prosperity was interpreted as evidence of that love and care. If things had come to such a pass that a complete wedding celebration was not possible, then the dark thought that God had withdrawn His love and care would naturally occur to the average mind. Just as a good marriage celebration could be seen as a sign of happy prospects, a poor marriage celebration could be seen as a sign of doom. With this context in mind, we see, then, that Jesus's act of saving the celebration in Cana implies an affirmation of divine love and care.

But with his response to his mother when she tells him that the wine has run out, Jesus suggests that he has no intention of saving the celebration. Rather coldly, it may seem to us, Jesus says, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." Quite mysteriously then, it may seem to us, Mary turns to servants and says something that suggests she has heard a message in the words her son has spoken that is at odds with the words themselves. Turning to the servants, she says, "Do whatever he tells you." The moment may always be somewhat mystifying to us. Perhaps, though, it makes sense for us to look at the matter this way: Jesus needs to inform his mother that if he does anything, she should know that it will

anticipate his full revelation of himself—the terrible and then wonderful disclosure of his ultimate identity. It could be, then, that Mary, to whom what lies ahead for her son has been revealed and who has long kept in her heart the knowledge, catches Jesus's meaning and, in solemn recognition of *the hour that has come*—a time for a *beginning*—tells the servants to do whatever her son says to do, since she knows that he is about to put progression toward his full revelation in motion. On this particular day, at a party that needs to be saved, on this sad little occasion, Mary is the first one to know that her son is ready to move on toward his complete actualization—his glory.

We might see the glory of Our Lord as glory that illuminated the blessedness of Israel, even if the mortal life of Jesus occurred at the time of the impending collapse of the nation. This aspect of Our Lord's glory—the illumination of the blessedness of Israel—is anticipated symbolically as Jesus orders that six large clay jars of the kind used for "the Jewish rites of purification" be filled with the water that he would turn into wine. The six clay jars may be seen as symbolizing six periods in the history of the Hebrew people when God bestowed love and care upon them by providing prophetic

guidance. In the first of these periods—the time in the Wilderness when Nation Israel was established under God's Law, there was the guidance provided through Moses, identified at the conclusion of *Deuteronomy* as the greatest prophet who ever lived. In the history of Israel presented in the books *Joshua* and *Judges*—a time when maintaining order in the Hebrew population and securing possession of Canaan was a constant struggle—guidance was supplied through Joshua, certainly, and Deborah as well. In a third era, Samuel was God's instrument for correcting a dissolute priestly class and offering new life to the nation. We might say that the books of *First Samuel* and *Second Samuel* straddle two eras, one in which God worked through Samuel and then, on its heels, another in which God worked through Nathan, who called King David into renewed righteousness at the height of Israel's worldly power. Next, there was the dark period, chronicled in *First Kings* and *Second Kings*, of the divided kingdom—which was brightened, briefly, by the figures of Elijah and Elisha, who had, relative to the march of history, only limited success in setting things right. In a sixth era, when Israel was brought to its knees by a succession of conquerors, the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and others voiced hope for renewal, despite

political realties that suggested the nation had fallen hopelessly out of favor with God. Only partially and only in brief interludes of peace and prosperity did it seem that Israel could survive its sixth-era crisis. In the time of Jesus, Nation Israel, under domination by Rome, faced the prospect that its sixth age would be its last.

The six jars, kept for "the Jewish rites of purification" as we're told, signified an understanding, through the prophets, of how righteousness—being right with God—was to be achieved. Most basically, achieving righteousness depended upon repentance and sacrifice. Throughout their long and difficult history as a nation, the Israelites had relied upon repentance and sacrifice. When life had been especially difficult for them, prophets had appeared, calling upon them to repent and seek forgiveness for their sins. Now, with the Son of the Living God present to them, righteousness would be redefined. It would be understood as the action of Grace in human lives, not as something that human beings could by their own actions achieve, no matter how holy those actions might seem. But the coming of a New Covenant into human life through Christ did not invalidate the history of the Hebrew people—the struggle of those people to

understand and to be faithful to God, who had appeared to Abraham generations before. Rather, Christ vindicated the struggle to understand and the effort to be faithful. Nation Israel would collapse as a political entity; but through Christ, who came not to overturn the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them, Abraham's expectation of endless blessings through generations until the end of Time would be met. Jesus gave life—and gives life—to what at one time seemed at the point of dying.

In another way anticipation of Our Lord's glory—of Jesus's complete actualization as the Savior of humanity—may be seen in what the *Gospel of John* presents as the first miraculous sign. Providing wine for the wedding feast at Cana, Jesus takes on what should be the function of the groom's family, or of the groom himself. The metaphor of God or God's Son as the bridegroom who takes Jerusalem or Israel or the Whole World as his bride occurs in many variations in Scripture. In our reading this morning from *Isaiah*, the prophet presents to Jerusalem a glorious vision: "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so will your God rejoice over you." In two memorable parables of Jesus—that of the Wedding Banquet (*Matthew* 22, *Luke* 14) and that of the Ten Maidens (*Matthew* 25)—the

bridegroom's father, in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet, represents God and the bridegroom, in the Parable of the Ten Maidens, represents the Son of God. For followers of Jesus, it is the destiny of the Whole of Creation to be judged by Jesus the Christ, the only Son of the Heavenly Father. As the end of Time is represented in our reading from *Revelation* this morning, the New Jerusalem is sent down from heaven by God, "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." Symbolically, Jesus presents himself in Cana as, in the ultimate reality that will finally be manifested for humankind, the Divine Bridegroom who will take possession of the World.

Jesus represents himself later in the *Gospel of John*, on the night of his betrayal, as "the true vine." He says, "I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener" (15: 1). At the wedding in Cana, Jesus's action, at a moment in Time, both anticipates a future, in which Jesus's glory will be fully revealed to humanity, and looks back, to Jesus's presence before Time, when the Son was with the Father and, as the Father willed it, brought Creation into being. From the true vine came the wine that was served to wedding guests one day in a little out-of-the-way village called Cana.