

When The Wine Runs Out

John 2:1-11
January 17, 2010

I.

What can we do when the wine runs out? Today's reading can help us deal with that timeless question of how we overcome the inevitable hurdles that life places in our paths.

And we can turn to this story of transformation of water into wine in a small town in Galilee two thousand years ago because it foreshadows the transforming effect Jesus can have on us today.

We have good times and bad. And as we encounter the realities of the world, our lives might be like the poor wine that was served first at that wedding in Cana. We drink but it does not satisfy, and we still thirst for something more. Then, in some way or another the wine can run out.

And of course I'm speaking figuratively rather than literally. I'm referring to the darkness that can follow the end of fleeting pleasures or temporary joys that often seem so important. These are the times when the difficulties of life can overshadow our hopes or threaten our happiness.

We all probably have had rough patches in our lives when at sometime or another, in some way or another, the wine runs out, so to speak. And if Jesus is not around, then we can be left with an empty glass, wondering how it all got this way.

But today's Gospel offers hope. When Jesus is in the picture he offers us good wine, better than we've ever had, and more than we'll ever need. And behind all the metaphors we really are talking about the new person we can be in Christ when we invite him into our lives, whether it's for the first time, or once again.

II.

Let's look at the setting of this story. Here was Jesus, shortly after his baptism, at the first century Jewish equivalent of a wedding reception. His mother was with him, along with others who only had become his disciples a few days earlier. It was the very beginning of his ministry, and this was his first miracle. Here he gave his first sign of who he really is.

And isn't it a unique setting for such a thing to happen? Jesus didn't start off by healing the sick, or making the lame walk, or by restoring the life of a child. No, in the blink of an eye he just brewed up some wine for people who probably already had too much to drink. Is this how we would have expected our Lord and Savior to have revealed himself? What was his purpose in starting out this way?

Thinking of this reading frequently reminds me of the story about the preacher who was pulled over by a state trooper. The officer asked if the preacher had been drinking, and he answered, "No, only water." The trooper then said, "Well, why do I smell wine." and the preacher, without missing a beat said, "Good Lord! He's done it again!"

A lot of jokes are made about turning water into wine. But a closer examination shows the real meaning of what Jesus did at that wedding in Cana. This story gives us a preview of Jesus' ministry and his proclamation of God's kingdom.

That's because the miracle was all-encompassing. It illustrated Jesus' later teachings about being servants and placing others first. It showed how he was able to inspire people to have faith in him. It introduced the idea of being obedient to his will. And it foreshadowed how his ministry, evidenced by the good wine, revealed the promise of blessings to come.

III.

The action in the story began when Jesus' mother suddenly informed him that the wine had run out. And at this point we should understand that according to the culture of first century Palestine, a social disaster was imminent. Failure to have sufficient wine for one's guests would have been rude, impolite, and remembered for years. Beverage choices were limited. If water was not safe to drink, then wine often was the only option.

And why did Mary expect Jesus to do anything about it? We might be cynical and say it was because Jesus was thirty years old and still hanging around the house. And Jesus' response might have sounded like what our kids sometimes tell us. He basically said it wasn't his problem.

But a more thorough examination of this exchange reveals something else. Jesus was hesitant at first to do anything because he thought his hour had not yet come. He probably expected that the beginning of his ministry would be determined by his Father, not his mother.

But Mary had other plans. She turned to the servants and said "do whatever he tells you." And now, it gets interesting, because six empty stone water jars were in the house where the party was underway. Each had a capacity, in modern terms, of twenty to thirty gallons, a total capacity of about one hundred fifty gallons. That's a lot of wine.

Well, for some reason, Jesus changed his mind and decided to act, and told the servants to fill the jars to the brim with water. They did so and Jesus immediately transformed it into wine. Then the servants took a sample of the new wine to the chief steward, who found it superior to the old wine that had run out, and the steward praised the host for saving the best until last.

We do not know how or why Jesus did this, but it's not important. What's important is that this story is basically Act One, Scene One of the drama of Jesus' ministry that would unfold over the next two years.

In that sense it's also important that Jesus' disciples saw this entire miracle occur. Jesus did not transform the water in the presence of the masses. He did it in the presence of his disciples as a sign for them, and they believed. This was part of their preparation for the work to come.

IV.

And this story of the wedding feast spans the centuries to reach us today because it points beyond Cana to the larger truth of God's kingdom. This story about the spirits into which water was transformed back then anticipates how the Holy Spirit can guide us now. And if we follow the Spirit's lead, we can know the abundance of God's grace and the joy of a Christian life.

But this abundance of new and better life we sometimes take for granted. And at other times we find it difficult to even reach out and drink from that cup of grace. Sometimes it seems that the wine just runs out.

It can run out when our lives become filled with pressures and demands that leave no time for family or ourselves.

It can run out when we learn from our doctor that the results of the test are not encouraging, or that our lifestyle must change because of our health.

The wine can run out when worldly issues divide our families, or financial problems beset us, or when we lose someone dear to us.

Last week the entire world witnessed how the wine dramatically ran out for millions of people in Haiti.

Sooner or later, in some way or another, the wine runs out. Our friends can drift away. Our jobs and careers, once challenging and rewarding, come to an end. Unanticipated difficulties appear and throw us off track.

And then there also are those bone-tired moments when the road to the kingdom seems to have taken a detour, but we don't know why. It's like the sun hides behinds clouds and the birds no longer sing. The garden is more like a desert.

But we want to trust that God's abundance is sufficient, don't we? We want to know that in his love for us he provides what we need, and all we must do is just reach out.

But sometimes we ask ourselves if God really has provided. In our hearts we probably know that he has, and if we are honest we might acknowledge that it is we who have fallen short. If we feel more distant from God perhaps we should ask ourselves "who moved?"

In many ways our lives today are like those at that wedding feast in Cana. We celebrate just as those wedding guests celebrated. We have families, friends, and material things just as they did. There often is excitement, the future seems bright, and there is wine to drink.

But without God's promise it sometimes quickly fades. Even though we profess our faith we can find that our lives seem like the poor wine, inferior in quality, and quickly consumed.

John's Gospel today tells us of another wine, a fine wine of matchless quality and great abundance. It is the wine of Jesus' glory, which was first made known to the disciples at an ordinary wedding feast, just as it also can be made known to us in the ordinary things we do.

And this wine, like all good wine, comes with a cost. But the cost is an easy price to pay. We will never exceed our credit limit no matter how many times we run the card through the machine.

Jesus merely asks us to live our lives in a relationship with him, free from pride and pretense. He also asks us to live in a relationship with each other, committed to the daily task of recognizing the needs and interests of others as well as our own.

V.

The old wine will run out, but the new wine always is there for us, better than ever and in unlimited quantities. If we wish to drink from that cup of the covenant, however, we are called to do two things.

First, we must remember that this best wine is available from only one guest among the multitudes of people who swirl into and out of our lives. And sometimes that important guest can get lost in the crowd. Jesus knocks, but it is up to us open the door.

Second, we must remember the words of Mary, who said to the servants "do whatever he tells you." Those words speak to us today. We also are called to do what he tells us, and if we do so then through obedience and active faith we can see our lives be transformed, just as ordinary everyday water was transformed at that wedding feast.

It is up to us and the choice is clear. Good wine or poor wine. Wine in limited quantities or more than we will ever need. We can try to drink of the fallen world, or we can drink of the heavenly cup that Jesus offers to us. And if we place our Lord at the center of our lives, we can know the abundance of God's grace and the lasting joy of new life in him. *Amen.*