

THIS, THE FIRST OF HIS SIGNS, JESUS DID AT CANA IN GALILEE- Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

John 2,1-11

On the third day there was a marriage at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; Jesus also was invited to the marriage, with his disciples. When the wine failed, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now six stone jars were standing there, for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the steward of the feast." So they took it. When the steward of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, "Every man serves the good wine first; and when men have drunk freely, then the poor wine; but you have kept the good wine until now." This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

The gospels were not written to be read by the people. Why? Because the vast majority of the people, were illiterate. The gospels are works of literary, theological, spiritual, are extremely complex, and rich with significance and were sent to a community where the reader, the theologian of that community, did not limit himself to read to the others, but he interpreted them.

And to interpret it followed the keys of interpretation, those indications that the evangelist, the author put into the text. It is what we try to do with the today's lesson, John's gospel, chapter 2, the first eleven verses; known as the marriage of Cana. Let us see what the evangelist wants to tell us.

Let us see the first indication that the evangelist proposes. *"On the third day there was a marriage at Cana in Galilee,"* The third day, for a Jew of that time, it recalls immediately the day of the alliance, the day in which on Sinai, God gave the alliance to Moses for his people.

Therefore, the evangelist wants to say: attention, all of this passage is the key to the alliance with God. And the marriage! This alliance between God and his prophets was represented through the marriage; God was the bridegroom and the people of Israel, the bride.

“Jesus also was invited to the marriage, with his disciples. When the wine failed,...” In the ritual of the marriage the focal point is when the bride and groom drink wine from a single chalice. The wine represents love. Here is a marriage where the most important element is missing, the wine.

“...the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” The mother of Jesus who also belonged to the wedding, does not say, as one might expect: “We have no wine”, but “They have no wine.” Jesus’ mother represents that faithful Israel that had always conserved this love with God. And Jesus’ reply might seem strange, even wrong and rude, if we think that it is said by a son to his mother.

“And Jesus said to her, “O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” Let us try to understand what the evangelist wants to express. “Woman” means “wife, married woman”. They are the three female characters to whom, in this gospel, Jesus refers to with this title. They are the image of the brides of God.

So, Jesus’ mother represents the faithful bride of the Old Testament; another female character to whom Jesus refers to calling her “woman” is the Samaritan woman, meaning the adulterer Israel that the groom conquers with an offer greater than love. And, the last character to be called “woman” by Jesus in this gospel is Mary Magdalene, who represents the bride of the new alliance

Then Jesus recalling his characteristic of faithful bride says: *“...what have you to do with me?”* Meaning, what’s it to do with me? *“My hour has not yet come.”*

Jesus’ mother believes that the Messiah will announce the new life to the old institution. But Jesus has not come to put new life into the old institution, but to formulate a new one, that we will see now.

Therefore, Jesus said: “That he is not interested”. *“His mother said to the servants,..”* Servants, meaning deacons, they that freely, voluntarily, for love, put themselves to serve, and here the evangelist puts the words, into Mary’s mouth, from the Book of Exodus when the people replied to Moses: “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.” (Exodus 19,7)

Here his mother says to the servants *“Do whatever he tells you.”* She sees Jesus as a new lawmaker, the new Moses that must be listened to. And here the description now goes to the environment.

“Now six stone jars were standing there,” not clay jars, as represented in many paintings, but six stone jars, therefore big and immovable, in stone as the tables of the law. What are they used for? *“...for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.”* Therefore in this family place there are these jars that must contain a good six hundred liters of water for the purification.

Here is why there is no wine. A religion that includes a sense of guilt, unworthiness, that makes a man feel that he has always need to ask forgiveness, to purify himself, always impure, is a religion that it is impossible to find and accept the love of God. This is why one always needs to purify oneself.

“Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the steward of the feast.” There is the steward, the responsible for the feast. This wedding feast lasted for days, and sometimes even weeks. And this steward must be careful that there was no lack of food and above all no lack of wine.

He does not care. He represents the religious leaders whom are not preoccupied and they do not care that the people do not have this relationship with God.

“So they took it. When the steward of the feast tasted the water now become wine,... “ The jars never contained the wine of Jesus, but the water became wine when it was drawn from the jars. *“* *When the steward of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew),* therefore the jars never contained Jesus’ wine but contained water, - *“..called the bridegroom”*

But let’s first understand the reaction. What is the meaning of this change? It is the new alliance that Jesus proposes to us, A new relationship with God, no more based on the obedience of the laws, making one always feel unworthy and impure, but on the welcoming of his love. With Jesus, God’s love is not given for the merits of a person, only to those that merit it, but for the needy, therefore given to all.

“..called the bridegroom” and he scolds him *“Every man serves the good wine first; and when men have drunk freely, then the poor wine; “* This is normal. In a feast that lasts many hours, or even many days, at the beginning, the good wine is served and then later the poorer wine. *“..but you have kept the good wine until now.”*

For the authorities the new wine belongs to the past. The authorities are unable to understand that good must yet come. Well, at the end of this episode, and here the evangelist is saying: “Attention! I am not telling a story, but something much more profound”, the evangelist says: *“This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory.”* It is the only time that it is written that Jesus manifests his glory. It is not said when Jesus rises Lazarus, a death of four days, but here the evangelist says to us “Attention! This is not a tale of water changed into wine or for the guests already tipsy, but it speaks of the change of the alliance. There is no need for purification to accept God’s love, but it is the of welcoming God’s love that purifies mankind.