

Second Sunday after Epiphany

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Introduction

In the story known as the wedding at Cana we look at the relationship between mother and son, and wonder about the complexity of obeying parents as adults. Along the way we glance at gender complications in the story and the need to give Mary a name. But above all this it is enlightening to consider how both Mary and Jesus help uproot the shame culture of their day before its toxic flower can take root.

Text

John 2:1–11

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realise where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Comment

On the surface this seems like such a frivolous miracle to start Jesus' ministry. He turns water into wine to facilitate a wedding celebration, but what can be said about this story if we view it through the lens of conflict?

The first thing perhaps is about the status and role of Jesus' mother. Notice she is not named in the story, instead she is always referred to through her association with Jesus. She is 'Jesus' mother' or 'his mother.' There are many still today in our culture who are only known through their association with someone else that society thinks is more significant.

I wish John had afforded Mary the dignity of a name. Even if John maybe thought it was enough that it was Jesus to whom she was being linked. Or maybe, because it was Jesus to whom she was being linked.

That said, there are other details in the story which maybe suggest an additional dimension and that Mary was someone important. First, John is explicit in stating that Mary was at the wedding (it may even have been an marriage in their wider family), whilst Jesus and his disciples are mentioned in the 'also there' category. They are not celebrity or special guests. Is John giving Mary a noteworthy status? Perhaps.

Secondly, when the wine was gone, but the wedding party wasn't over, she is in the know about the crisis, so she may have had a significant position. And she brings the problem to Jesus. As the son of an Irish mammy (named Patricia by the way), I think I know the tone with which she approached him. I suspect Mary's comment to her son is not gossip on her part, and Jesus response to her suggests the same. Clearly he knows she is not conveying information but asking for action. And so, ever the dutiful son, Jesus accedes to her veiled instruction.

I choose not to see Jesus words to her as a tired rebuke, (the greek word *gunai* is more affectionate than its stark English translation '*woman*' appears) rather as reflecting the complexity of obedience to the fourth commandment. It is one thing to instruct a child to honour parents in an effort to coerce or persuade obedience. It is quite another thing, and much more complex, to be obedient to parents as an adult.

There is also something lovely here potentially—the silent, wordless understanding that exists between family members or close friends. Mary didn't have to enter into a debate, or even a conversation with her son, she issued little more than a gesture. There is here, perhaps, something of what Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh recognised as "the half-talk code of mysteries/and the wink-and-elbow language of delight."

Mary knows her son. She also has status sufficient to be able to approach the servants at the feast and instruct them, clearly in this case, in what to do. She didn't know exactly what Jesus would do, only that it would be something. I have the picture of Mary moving seamlessly, unflappably, through both the throng of guests and the busyness of the attendants.

There is one more thing to notice through this lens. Jewish weddings were lavish affairs, particularly if the family was reasonably wealthy. It is not inconceivable that the whole village was invited. So important were wedding celebrations deemed to be that some Rabbis were minded to excuse revellers from the obligations of religious observance. For the wine to run out before the party was done would be a cause of deep shame on the family concerned.

Jesus, at the urgings of Mary, steps quietly in to this bubbling crisis before it breaks on the whole community and a family is burdened with shame. There is no drama here, the story suggests that only the servants knew what had happened while the inebriated guests are delighted that the quality of the wine just keeps getting better. And these guests end up the beneficiaries of a miracle the nature of which they are unaware.

More significantly perhaps I wonder if Jesus does something truly radical here. If he doesn't get involved, as he indicated was possible, he would leave this family open to the shame culture of the town. The wine runs out to the cries of outrage on the part of the guests, and the "shame on you" accusations spoken directly and lingering long after in local behind-the-hand whispers. Shame is used as a weapon to belittle, and humiliate, it creates resentment and fuels the fires of hatred. And it leaves its scars. One of them is the scar of rage and anger. Shame on the part of the perpetrator is often the dominant emotion behind their acts of violence.

Does Jesus intervention mean that the servants are spared the violence that could come their way, both physical and emotional, from the bridegroom and his family seeking to relocate their rage at their public shaming?

It may be that Jesus here uproots the shame culture before its toxic flower can bloom.

One last thing. As we say in Ireland, he didn't lick it up off the street! We should note that Mary refuses to participate in shaming the hosts either. Right at the start she quietly goes to Jesus and seeks his assistance instead of blowing the lid off the lack. And I like to think that maybe Jesus learned from his mother's gentle compassion in a way that deepened his understanding of his own vocation, and that this denial of the shame culture was something of the glory that was revealed.

It's possible that Mary, the lifelong observer of her special son, had insight into his character and nature as well as his vocation that was deeper than his at this moment. She realised it was time to step up, even if he didn't or felt reluctant. Maybe even Jesus needed this little nudge.

Response

Decide that for a day at least you will acknowledge people by their name, where possible. The barista who makes your coffee, the bus driver who gives you your ticket, the waiter who serves your meal. All the otherwise nameless people you will meet today pay them the grace of acknowledging them by name.

And maybe also reflect on the weaponising of shame. Have you been a victim of manipulation by shaming? Remember, you are not who they want you to be or who they say you are. Shaming has no place in the community of God's people.

And if you find yourself using shame to control people, then take time to reflect on Mary and Jesus' actions in this story.

Prayer

Loving God
Who knows us better than we know ourselves,
Thank you for friends and family
Who know us better than we know ourselves.

Thank you for those with the courage
To challenge us
And push us
To do the right thing
Even when to do no thing
Would be more comfortable

May our relationships
Be marked by love
And gentleness and respect
And may they never know the sting
Of shame nor fear
Nor scorn nor disrespect

In order that we, together,
May in some small way
Reflect the light and love
Of your relationship with Mary,
Whose child you were.

Amen