

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

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Introduction

How is it that we come to learn things – either to discover something previously unknown, unthought or unimagined, or to see something that we believe we know or understand in a completely new light? How do we help or hinder new insights or understandings in becoming manifest, or new actions being initiated? In the readings for this season of Epiphany, manifestations of, and revelations about, Jesus and his purposes don't just come thick and fast, they happen in a wide variety of ways. All of these not only add to understanding of Jesus, but also provide useful insights into some of the dynamics involved in conflict scenarios and our roles in them.

Preparation: Recall a time when you learned something completely new – perhaps about a person, a situation or a historical event – or when you had your understanding about something challenged, overturned or expanded. What brought that situation about? Can you identify any key elements or dynamics involved? What was the effect?

or

Read through all the gospel readings set for the Epiphany season (you can find them all here <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/lections.php?year=C&season=Epiphany>) What similarities and differences do you see in how the different revelations come about or are received?

Text

John 2:1–11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there.

Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.

When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.”

And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.”

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

Now standing there were six stone water jars 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 chief steward.” So they took it.

When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, “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.”

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Comment

The gospel readings for the season of Epiphany present us with a variety of incidents (sometimes more than one in a text) furnishing revelations about Jesus and his mission. Each has different dynamics, directions and outcomes: some are full of emotion but unencumbered by words (Mt 2: 10–11); some involve speech which is direct, clear and admirably succinct (Lk 3:21; Lk 5: 4–8) while others are more oblique and enigmatic (Lk 3:16–17). Some borrow a voice from the past (Lk 4:14–21) and others use well known national stories to press the point; some begin awkwardly and end better (Lk 5:4–11) and some that look promising turn sour (Lk 4: 21–30). Some seem to be directed primarily at or involve either individuals or just a few folk (Lk 3:22; Lk 5: 4–8; Lk 2: 22–40; Lk 9: 28–26), while others target a larger audience (Lk 4: 14–30; Lk 6: 17–38); sometimes the revelatory event or moment happens abruptly or is over quickly (Lk 5: 8; Lk 3:21–22) and in others it unfolds and evolves over the course of the narrative (Lk 2: 27–35). Sometimes the event or words are located centre-stage (Lk 6:17) but other times – as in today’s passage, they seem to occupy a very much more peripheral location in various ways.

All of these different aspects provide us with useful insights that we can bring to bear as we think about how we understand and read conflict scenarios and their complex dynamics. Today’s reading – which itself contains an intriguing moment of tension – points us towards two things in particular: the question of where we are focusing our attention, and the importance of making or holding spaces where dynamic change can occur.

For something so important in the overall schema of John’s gospel, the story of this ‘first sign’ has a surprising degree of marginality woven through it: the setting is a village wedding; the bride and bridegroom – who might be expected to play a key role in a wedding story – barely feature; Jesus’ actions are anything but ostentatious, and the people privy to the miraculous happening itself are not the

bride and groom but the servants and John's audience – indeed it seems that the bride and groom remain unaware that they have been saved from the shame of the wedding feast running dry. As so often in the gospel texts, significant action involving the kingdom of God occurs elsewhere than we might expect – it is often at the margins, either geographically or sociologically, where understanding first evolves or movement and change begin.

This is not to say that we should never be looking 'centre-stage' or should always ignore or dismiss mainstream understandings as we grapple with difficult scenarios. Neither is it to imply that 'truth' or worthwhile progress can only be found at the margins (understood in various ways) of a situation or group. Rather it is a reminder that, when we are seeking to try and understand complex situations, particularly ones involving conflict, we need to make sure that we don't attend only to the obvious, popular or dominant narratives (and to those voices promoting them) but also give time to listening to and considering those which are perhaps less comfortable and safe, or which feel counterintuitive in some way.

There is another intriguing decentering in John's text and one which introduces us to the second key element in this particular revelatory episode. We might expect, especially given that it is the introduction to the first sign of Jesus' glory, that the text would read

2:1 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and Jesus and his disciples were there.

2:2 The mother of Jesus had also been invited to the wedding.

But instead, it is Jesus' mother who gets the first mention and this alerts us to and underlines the vital role which she plays in the subsequent drama.

It is not simply that she gives Jesus a bit of a nudge in a particular direction. Rather her words – to Jesus and to the harassed servants – open up a space in which the former can act in a way which becomes revelatory and reinforcing for his disciples (and for John's readers).

Unsurprisingly, since his focus is on the sign itself, John gives us no hint as to why Mary acts in the way she does – even in the face of what might seem to be a disinterested, if not frankly dismissive, response from her son. However, this is the Mary who has interrogated an archangel (Lk 1:34), who has listened to and treasured the story brought by the shepherds (Lk 2:19), welcomed visiting Magi (Mt 2: 11), heard the prophesy of Simeon (Lk 2: 34) and seen her child debating with the teachers in the Temple (Lk 2: 46). She is someone who sees, takes note and thinks about things. In fact, she is a good example of the multifaceted listening and reflection touched on earlier.

It's easy to imagine that these stories have been shared with her son as he grows up. Similarly to imagine that Jesus might well have told Mary something of his time in the wilderness following his baptism, and of the testing and tempering of his sense of identity and purpose which ensued – after all, these too are important threads of his narrative. Whatever the reason, Mary takes action with enough commitment and conviction to catalyse the situation, and an important stage in the evolving understanding of the disciples and of John's audience (perhaps even of Jesus himself) ensues.

Sometimes in conflict (as in other scenarios) we can get trapped in ways which

immobilise us. Perhaps all our energy has gone into self-preservation or into shoring up a particular *status quo*. Or it could be that we are anchored to a particular understanding, narrative or identity which constrains our imagination or narrows our range of possible actions. Indeed it could be that this latter is what we see here with Jesus: 'my hour is not yet come' seems to indicate attention to a very particular narrative mindset at this moment in time. What Mary does – perhaps because she knows him, or perhaps because her own experiences and ponderings have given her a different insight – is to change the shape and energy of the situation. This in turn then opens up the possibility of a different line of thinking and action for Jesus to pursue.

These dynamics of paralysis and catalysis will be very familiar to anyone who has been in a conflict situation. Indeed we may find ourselves in one of these positions ourselves – as one who needs help to break free in some way, or as one who can change the dynamics or energy of a situation. In both scenarios, the more we understand about the particular conflict and those involved in it (including ourselves), the better the chances that creative change can occur. And of course there is a third possibility present in some of the other gospel stories that we also need to be aware of and guard against: we might sometimes be the one who actively opposes or blocks positive change and so keeps someone trapped or a situation paralysed.

Response

Reflect on a situation of conflict – either current or in the past – in the light of the themes discussed above and consider any of the following questions

What is informing my understandings about this situation? Are there other places I should be looking, or other people I should be listening to, which might help me develop a fuller or broader understanding? If so, what can I do about this?

Is there anything which might be hindering me from thinking or acting differently or more creatively in this situation? If so, what might I be able to do to change this?

Are there any ways in which I could change the dynamics of a situation, or support someone else in doing this in order to make space for the possibility of constructive change, in either thinking or action, for those involved?

Prayer

Jesus,
enabler of the new,
it seems that sometimes
even you needed
help in moving forward;
but also that you were neither
afraid of changing
nor too proud
to accept the enabling
of others.

Help us to be likewise
free of the fear or pride
which might prevent us
from seeking
accepting

or inhabiting
the creative spaces
opened up for us
by those who can see differently
or imagine other possibilities.

Amen

Season: Epiphany

Themes: Conflict Skills