

Sermon about John 2, 1-11 on 2nd Sunday after Epiphany 2021 in Brussels

Blessing: Grace and peace to you, from Jesus Christ, he, who is the same yesterday and today and forever. (Amen.)

Bible: (1) On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. (2) Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. (3) When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” (4) And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” (5) His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” (6) Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. (7) Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. (8) And he said to them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.” So they took it. (9) When the master 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 master of the feast called the bridegroom (10) and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.” (11) This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

Prayer: Father, you spoke the world into existence (Genesis 1). You speak new life into your children to give us the light of the knowledge of your glory in Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). Give us the grace to receive your Word and rejoice in it (Psalm 119:18). Convict us of our sins and Christ’s sufficiency so that sinners would be converted (John 16:7–11), the weak strengthened, and Christ’s body built up.

Sermon: *Opening – An hair-raising history of explanation:* Today we have listened to the Gospel with the report of the wedding of Cana. It is hair-raising how theologians since the Middle Ages have tried to soften to explain or even scandalise this passage which does not match their ideas of Jesus Christ and their ascetic faith. The common opinion for many decades has been that this passage cannot be historically true. One argument is that the huge amount of wine is way too unbelievable (indeed, we talk about approximately 720 litres!!! – this is way enough to make a battalion of soldiers drunk) and they ask how the Evangelist John could dare to show us Jesus as such a dissolute person who performs some kind of magic for such an immoral kind of party. There are just a few theologians who understand and show the construction and message of the Evangelist John who tries to correspond and expand the message of the three older Gospel versions. It is absolutely stunning what you can discover in this short, at first glimpse simple story. I invite you to take a look on some particular points.

Part 1 – A first “sign”: First of all, the Evangelist John does not call Jesus’ action a “miracle”. John uses the word “sign”. Jesus never does something just for doing it or to entertain people with some kind of magic trick, not even to convince them of his message! With his actions, with his signs, he shows something. Signs are tools to show something beyond, they lead a way, or they explain what and how to do or sometimes they also show what is prohibited. Signs are signals. And this sign at the wedding of Cana, as we can read, is the first sign of Jesus.

It stands at the beginning of the Gospel report according to St. John. John shows with this report the direction of Jesus' message. And it is a great message of fullness!

Part 2 – Godly fullness against human shortage: At the beginning of the Gospel report people are gathered to celebrate love and life. They want to be happy and free. But quickly the joy is diminished. There is a great shortage at this feast. They do not have the appropriate goods. They are running out of wine way too early. Wine is in the Bible not just an alcoholic drink, according to the wrong and sad idea “we need alcohol to be happy”. Wine is the most precious, godly drink. The top of human agricultural achievements. A bit like “nectar and ambrosia”, the drink of the gods in the Greek mythology or in the comic strips of Asterix and Obelix. In the Bible, wine is the symbol of a perfect life in fullness under God's blessing. – And this is no longer possible in Cana – and in general. And then Jesus comes along and finds a remedy, Jesus puts things right. Jesus Christ puts overwhelming godly fullness against shaming human shortage. Jesus does not want to promote an orgy. Jesus wants that people can have and celebrate the perfect life and love joyfully.

Part 3 – mercy before law: Then it is said that there are stone water jars for the purification according to the Jewish law before the wedding and the party can begin. First, you have to prepare yourself! The water is there to be used by humans to cleanse themselves to become pure. Six huge stone jars as a massive symbol for the Old Testament Law! And right this water is turned by Jesus generously and freely into wine! The mercy of God overwhelms the law. The water would never be enough. But Jesus again creates a remedy. There is nothing more to do than to enjoy. Enjoy the overflowing, perfect mercy in form of wine. Jesus himself provides the equipment to celebrate with him.

Part 4 – Who is the bride, who is the bridegroom?: Most of us have heard or read this story countless times. It is already a popular story in Children's Bibles. But have you ever noticed that the most important “thing” is missing? What or who is the centre of a wedding? It is the bride! But there is nothing said about the bride. And if we pay attention, we realise that even the bridegroom remains strangely invisible. The master of the feast is saying something to him. But the bridegroom does not answer, and it is not really clear to whom the master actually speaks. Does he know it himself? – If we trace this track, we could suspect that the symbolic bride could be Mary! Mary as the human being who receives God out of God's mercy. Or the person of the bride is widened to the whole congregation – the Church. And Jesus himself is the bridegroom – at least symbolically. – Remember, we are at the beginning of the Gospel according to St. John – at the end, we will be witnesses of a similar strange kind of wedding ceremony: under the Cross, when Jesus unites his mother Mary and John the disciple. Less than two chapters later the Evangelist quotes John the Baptist, saying: “The one who has the bride is the bridegroom.” And again, one chapter later, we have another kind of wedding situation between Jesus and the Woman of Samaria at the well. The Woman becomes the representative bride who is found and led home by the bridegroom Jesus. – The Wedding of Cana is the first messianic party. The program, setting the tone for the following reports. Remember: we see a sign by Jesus!

Part 5 – On the third day...: Maybe you also have a problem with Jesus’s harsh answer to his mother Mary. Jesus says: “My hour has not yet come.” – What does he mean? “The hour” is the code for the Evangelist John when Jesus fulfils his mission of redemption. It is the hour when the lambs are offered in the Temple for the forgiveness of sins, it is the hour of his death at the Cross for the forgiveness of the sin of the world. The code “the hour” in John appears regularly and it always refers to the Passion. And maybe you also have noticed the sudden begin of the report “On the third day...” The third day is the great day of resurrection! Cross and open grave are the goal of the Gospel. Again, this “first sign” at the beginning of the Gospel report points out to the last great sign. The sign of the Wedding of Cana is usually classified as a “gift miracle”. “The first sign is great! But the resurrection of the dead is a gift miracle which outperforms everything.”¹ The wine as the elixir of life here and the death at the Cross as the life elixir there – Jesus Christ is the ultimate giver of life. In and with him is life. And he lets us partake in this combination of wine and Cross: with the chalice of the Holy Supper also we enjoy this elixir of life; fullness of life on the third day.

Part 6 – The glory of God above everything: Finally, the report of the Wedding of Cana is a sign for us “between the times” as I would like to call it. It shows us the amazing glory of Jesus Christ – that he is real God, able to create the life-giving fullness out of pure mercy. And he already has brought and brings pleasure each new day. But many would also say: it is just a sign. I do not feel much of this blessing in my life. – Yes, that is our reality and the answer is: “My hour has not yet come.” In the Gospel according to St. John another concept is the “already now but not yet”. We are still on our personal way to Cross and Resurrection, even if it is a present truth. But the party is visible already now! We do not have to chastise ourselves and live ascetically. Jesus has invited us to the great wedding. We have a deeper knowledge of what is waiting for us. This changes life already now. And each time we taste the wine in the Holy Communion but also each time when we taste something we like very much (a tasty chocolate for example) we may have this as a sign for the great feast of life eternal to come.

Blessing: The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

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¹ Ralph Kunz. Predigtmeditation über Joh 2, 1-11. In: GPM#75/1. Göttingen 2020. Seite 133.