



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, January 16, 2022
The Second Sunday After The Epiphany

Festal Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Alison Turner, *Associate for Children & Family Ministry*
on
John 2:1-11
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An Unexpected Wedding Feast

Today we encounter a joyful manifestation of God's abundant love shared as the '*Dearly beloved: who have come together in the presence of God*', have gathered to witness a couple's marriage, and to feast with family and friends. Today's gospel reading is a familiar story, and one to which the Celebrant always refers as they solemnly address the congregation in the opening words of *The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage Service* from the Book of Common Prayer, which speaks of marriage as '*a bond and covenant established by God in creation... and that our Lord Jesus Christ adorned this manner of life by his presence and first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee...*'.

I am sure that we have all been to lavish and memorable wedding feasts where an abundance of hospitality, love and spirit is at the heart of the day. However, we don't have to look far, including to rom-coms on Netflix and reality TV shows, like the British series, *Don't tell the Bride*, (where the bride is intentionally and completely excluded from all planning even down to the venue, flowers and dress), that such occasions are laden with tears, and emotions are fueled by multiple external expectations about what makes such an occasion- great. Wedding preparations even in the calmest of households' regularly face moments of tension over guest lists, table plans and menus in a desire to be especially generous hosts. However, all these external factors, that may well be fun and important cultural traditions in themselves, are really peripheral to the inner workings of the soul, symbolized in the celebration of vows which are to be renewed and embodied in the marriage that follows the wedding day itself.

Over the past few months, I have had several conversations with couples about weddings and blessings, as celebratory dates have been both excitedly proposed, others have been disappointingly postponed and detailed long awaited plans have been creatively honed, along with other deeply needed rituals that mark life's endings and beginnings. And yet still over these past two years, when the familiar patterns of our life have been challenged, just as Fr. Moretz reminded us in his parish letter this week, the familiar rhythm of life with its powerful beat of births and deaths and other seasons have continued to usher in unanticipated sacred transforming moments. Significant moments which have often prompted us to pause and reconnect with a myriad of places and people both present and absent, including our sense of God himself.

We often find that while each of our life's milestone moments are distinct in themselves, they too become mysteriously interconnected or woven into the whole fabric of our life, within which God's presence too resides in the detail and those days which are simply ordinary. I am always reminded of this call upon Jesus' transforming presence into the whole spectrum of life's unfolding events and emotions, as each day at the Shrine here at noon we offer prayer requests of supplication, for those seeking healing, consolation or an

offering of thanksgiving for life and grace received. I too am reminded of God's constant presence when I say Mass in the Chantry Chapel, when I see up close the images of Jesus' life depicted behind the altar. As many of you are familiar, to the left of this altar piece we find a joyful new life-giving scene of the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus at his baptism, and to the right, in contrast we are shown a tangible expression of Jesus' humanity in his encounter with sorrow and grief in the face of the death of his friend Lazarus. Each of these images, and more throughout our beautiful church, remind us of Jesus' palpable presence in those key yet certain moments of our very own life: birth and death. And as some of you have shared, a presence that too can be found in our closest of relationships, which too can mirror the type of transformation we discover at the altar as the ordinariness of the bread and wine is blessed and changed into something holy.

As many of you will recall it is an image of today's miracle reading which is depicted at the center of this Chantry Chapel altar piece. Laid here before us we see a joyful, beautiful celebratory 'Kodak moment', which doesn't convey either the anxiety of a celebration under threat, or a feeling of amazement in that pivotal point when the wine had run out, and the day was rescued by a miracle.

Jesus' presence and purpose in that particular place, and with those particular people is made known in the detail of the moment. A moment that could have brought great embarrassment on the part of the hosting family, that is, until it happens: Jesus authors a change, when simple, ordinary water is turned into wine, and that is, the best of wines. It is clear he was not there simply there to bring about a change that would save the host's reputation or simply prolong the enjoyment of the wedding feast. He didn't simply provide a few extra wine bottles to tide the party over, instead he called upon the need for, and to use of huge abundant jars, vast vessels that would ordinarily be used for water for purification, for cleansing and for transforming one's soul. This miracle therefore isn't only about a man's compassionate response to an immediate external human need but a witness and invitation to encounter an inner change brought to those at the banquet and offered to us as well. Change which like the good wine exceeds everyone's expectations and signals a promise of transformation beyond any human imagination. For as we will hear later in this very Gospel, Jesus came that we might have life- and life in abundance.

Over the years Christians have reflected on how this memorable winetasting miracle is a foretaste of a Messianic Banquet, the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb to which are *Blessed to be called to his supper*. While others have focused on this passage as a foretaste of Jesus transforming ministry and his ultimate mission. For we find this miracle, the first of seven miracles in John's gospel, embedded within a part of the gospel, sometimes called the *Book of signs*, says scholar Fr. Raymond Brown, 'For it is where the Word reveals himself to the world and to his own ...'. It precedes the *Book of Glory*, and is a foretaste of 'The hour', which we hear Jesus tell Mary his mother is one that 'has not yet come'. The hour when Jesus is to be glorified upon the cross and we are to discover the fullness of Christ's Paschal Mystery.

One final interpretation of this wedding feast is an invitation, an invitation to reenter the gospel scene where we began, this time to ponder more carefully those around the banqueting table itself. With all this action and talk of change we can easily overlook those with whom Jesus participated in the very miracle itself, the servers, the guests, the happy couple and a small yet significant catalyst in this moment of miracle, found in the presence of his mother Mary. John recalls it was her noticing, her both seeing and saying something that prompted this revelatory miracle in which Christ's power and presence became known in a new and unexpected way. I wonder how this passage of scripture will have ended if Mary hadn't too been present or aware of the needs of the moment? Of course, we will never know. But I do know we can all underestimate the difference of both the presence and absence a word, a thought, an action can make in the lives of our neighbors, as we were reminded the other week by Fr. Bennett, in reflecting on the life of Desmond Tutu, the smallest of gestures can make a difference in our own hearts and those we least expect.

As the New Year and this Epiphany season continues to unfold: How might we discover the change he seeks to bring within each one of us? Or too be a catalyst for change for a more abundant, loving world?

And for those who this year will propose, prepare, postpone or celebrate your own wedding feasts: May Christ's transforming love be present in your marriage, beyond all your expectations. And in words taken from our Prayer Book's *Blessing of Marriage*:

*By the power of the Holy Spirit, may the abundance of that same spirit be poured upon you ... and on those you love... through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.***