

Ordinary 2 1.19.25

In 1904, the author O. Henry wrote a short story. It was titled the ***Gift of the Magi***. A brief synopsis of the story goes like this: despite being poor, a newly married husband and wife decide to give each other an elegant gift at Christmas. Because of their poverty, they don't know how they'll ever afford that gift, though. The young wife wants to buy a platinum chain for her husband's antique watch. She gets the money for this extravagant gift by selling her beautiful long hair. The young husband wants to buy several jeweled tortoiseshell combs for his wife's hair and sells his treasured watch to purchase the gift for her. Of course, each is shocked by what the other has done for their beloved.

The story concludes this way:

The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men— who brought gifts to the newborn Christ-child. They were the first to give Christmas gifts. Being wise, their gifts were doubtless wise ones.... (This young husband and wife) each sold the most valuable thing (they) owned in order to buy a gift for the other. But let me speak a last word to the wise of these days:...Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are the most wise.... ***They*** are the magi.

It is somewhat odd that the first miracle of Jesus described in the gospel of St. John is the changing of water into wine at the Wedding Feast at Cana. After all, if Jesus wanted to really impress folks, he might have started his ministry by raising someone from the dead or by calming the wind and the waves as the boys were boating on the Sea of Galilee. Instead, Jesus' first miracle is this - turning water into wine. Wouldn't a better wedding gift for this newly married couple be a bag of gold or a brand-new home to call their own? But Jesus, being truly wise, worked the most appropriate first miracle – for this couple, for those around the couple, and for us who hear this story today.

Since St. John's gospel is often called the ***Book of Signs***, we should look at the signs and deeper meaning behind this miracle which Jesus worked.

There are countless references throughout the scriptures that equate the Kingdom of God with a wedding feast. For those who lived in Old and New Testament times, the wedding feast is an apt description for God's Kingdom. Since life was so hard for people at that time and since they lived hand-to-mouth often wondering where their next meal would come from, wedding feasts had a particular significance. Weddings in those days lasted a week or more. That means that you had time off from the usual back-breaking work which burdened most people. It also meant the host would feed you and provide enough wine for the guests to celebrate for that week.

No wonder heaven described in those terms is so appealing. Such a feast meant rest, leisure, a full belly, and copious amounts of wine for celebrating. Jesus intended to convey those meanings by working this, his first miracle, at a wedding feast.

Second, Jesus didn't make just a little bit of wine. He didn't work a miracle that helped this newly married couple bridge the gap from having some wine to making it to the end of the week. No, he made 120-180 gallons of wine. Jesus clearly intended to convey that the Kingdom he was introducing folks to was a kingdom of abundance. He was conveying that God is the God of abundance as well. Our God is never half-hearted when working among us – whether its working a miracle or walking with us as we face a hardship.

Notice also that Jesus provided the couple and their guests with the best wine, not something inferior. God the Father has given us his best when he gave us his Son. There is nothing inferior about Christ. And the goodness and blessings of Christ come to us in abundance.

Toward the end of the gospels, Jesus again refers to wine. At the Last Supper, he takes a cup of wine and proclaims that this is the cup of his blood; the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. Once the disciples drink from the cup, Jesus says that he will not drink the fruit of the vine again until he establishes his Kingdom once and for all. St. John tells us in his gospel that when Jesus was crucified he was again

offered wine. Once he drank it, he handed over his Spirit. It is at this moment that our forgiveness is brought about. It is through this sign that Jesus permanently establishes his Kingdom that will last for all time.

The miracle of changing water into wine at the Wedding Feast of Cana is a life changing event. At first glance, it seems like a nice (and abundant gesture) which he makes for a newly married couple who would have normally been embarrassed that they did not provide enough for their invited guests. But more than providing prodigious amounts of wine, Jesus offers the sign that he is ushering in something new and life changing. He is offering his life to us in abundance. And he continues to work his miracle on this altar where he feeds us with his Body and Blood – bringing forgiveness and incorporating us into his Kingdom forever.

Maybe the couple would have appreciated a wedding gift from Jesus which was worth more money. Maybe those around Jesus would have preferred a more dramatic sign, something that they thought would have been more impactful, for a first miracle. But Jesus being all-wise, all-knowing, and God-in-the-flesh, gave the couple and gives us the greatest gift of all – himself. And being inconceivably generous, he continues to pour out himself to us every time we gather for Mass.

Today and every day we come together to celebrate Mass, we give thanks to God for the precious gift of himself which he gives to us. May what we receive be what we share with others – today and always.

Amen? Ament!