

Jesus certainly did like a good party. Many of our images of him are at a feast – having supper with tax collectors, dinner with Mary and Martha, even the Last Supper. He turned a couple of loaves and fishes into a great luncheon. So perhaps it should not surprise us that we find Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry at a wedding feast, having a good time.

The people of Galilee would have taken their weddings seriously. Travel was difficult and people who came from a distance had to be fed and watered. The ceremony itself may not have taken a long time, but the feasting would have lasted well into the night, maybe even for several days. There would have been dancing and singing, and of course drinking. The wine was a social lubricant, loosening people up a bit so they would let down their hair and have a good time. If the wine ran out, the party would be over, and the bride and groom and the parents would be embarrassed.

We still use alcohol in much the same way today. Perhaps we don't need booze to have a good time, and I'm certainly not suggesting that people should go out and get themselves inebriated in order to enjoy themselves. Drinking and driving were not big issues in Jesus' day. I also know that alcoholism is a severe and dangerous disease, and that there are people who should never touch the stuff. Just the same, alcohol is a big part of our culture, and most of our social gatherings use it to lower barriers that facilitate conversation.

It seems strange to us that Jesus would begin his ministry of performing miracles in such an extravagant, and seemingly undignified and lowbrow manner. Wouldn't it have been more noble if he had healed someone, or raised the dead? But John has Jesus beginning his ministry with this miracle story for a reason. It is because the wedding feast tells us something about the

Kingdom that Jesus proclaims. It is about joy, about union, and about community, qualities that are apparently common to both weddings and the kingdom.

Joy, Union, Community. Weddings are usually joyous times when we celebrate the beginning of a new family. We can anticipate a similar joy in the kingdom of God, when we begin a new life in the family of God. Weddings are about the union of two people who come together for mutual love and support. The kingdom unites us with God, who comes together with us in a sense of abundance in a new creation. Weddings are about the community which comes together to support the new couple. In turn, marriage is not meant just for the satisfaction of two people, but for hospitality and openness to the whole community. Marriage confers a responsibility to build a strong community in which to raise families. The kingdom too is a community which invites all of God's people into relationship, and into the task of growing in holiness.

The wedding feast is used as a metaphor for the kingdom of God several places in the gospels. For example, in Matthew there is the parable of the king who invites the nobles to the wedding feast of his son, but his invitations are spurned, so he invites those in the streets instead. He finds a man without the wedding robe, and throws him out. In Luke there is the master who returns from the wedding banquet and finds his servants waiting to greet him. He tells people not to seek the place of honor at the wedding banquet, but to be called to a higher place.

The coming of Christ is the beginning of the kingdom, the beginning of the marriage of God with his people. So it is fitting that the beginning of Christ's ministry begins with a wedding. It is his wedding, his marriage to the church, and the extravagance of the wine which suggests to us the abundance he brings to our relationship with him. He invites us to the wedding, he gives us new clothes to wear, a new glory to put on. But too often we are like the

nobles who have better things to do, who reject the wedding invitation. Or if we go, we are too proud to put on the wedding garment, to let him truly change our lives and become new people. We reject the joy, reject the union, reject the community.

We are at a wedding party too. It's called life. We have been invited to share in the great abundance of creation – the lavish abundance that Jesus signifies in the extra quality and quantity of wine. Kay and I love to get outdoors and see what is out there. Even in the dead of winter, there is much to marvel at. The abundance and flamboyance of all the different species of animals and plants are enough to astound us. The change in colors in the fall is a riot. I'm afraid that if we ever go to the Amazon jungle or see the birds of Costa Rica with its lavish bird life, it would just knock us off our pins. Sometimes we can hardly help but laugh and giggle at the sheer hilarity of it sometimes. It is joyous.

Have you ever watched a three year old have his or her first encounter with something new – perhaps a frog or a caterpillar. They laugh and giggle at the wonder of it, the discovery of some new piece of God's creation. We melt at the joy they show when they play with a puppy. Their curiosity and wide-eyed wonder makes us long for the time when we could enjoy the world the way they do. When did we lose that? When did our wine begin to run low?

There is much that can drive the joy of life out of us, if we let it. We are somehow taught that expressing our joy is undignified. It leaves us vulnerable to strange looks, so we become reserved and protective of our feelings. The drudgery of jobs, the loss of loved ones, dealing with difficult relationships, all can knock the joy out of us. Our spirits can become dry unless we give them a chance to be refilled, as the stone jars were filled with good wine.

Luckily, we get to go back to the wedding feast every week. The church is the community of the kingdom of God, and our great sacraments are the wedding feast. It is perhaps

most readily seen in baptism, when souls are given membership not only into the church but into the kingdom. We are marked as Christ's own forever; we are wedded to Christ, and enter into a new life of joy, union, and community. Perhaps we should be marking this great event in our lives by praying for our baptismal anniversaries as well as for physical birthdays. It is the wedding feast all over again, and our spirits are refilled with the best wine.

In Eucharist, we again are united to Christ in his real presence in the body and blood. We literally and symbolically take Christ into our selves. We are in him, and he in us. We become one flesh. In that union we find acceptance and love that fulfills us, and completes us. And in that coming together, we birth the new life of ourselves into the community of humanity, into the kingdom of God. Just as the married couple does not exist just for itself, our marriage to Christ has a purpose beyond our own fulfillment. In the Eucharist we are empowered to reach out in hospitality to those around us, to welcome others into our household, to open our doors to those who also need acceptance and love, to tell others that fulfillment and completion and abundance are found in relationship with Jesus Christ. When we become one flesh with Christ, we become co-creators with him of a new world, and give birth to the kingdom of God in this world at least in some small way.

In Eucharist we return to the joy of our wedding feast every week. We drink in the fine wine of Christ's spirit. It might even make us a bit giddy. If you have ever been to a church service in one of the Pentecostal churches you know that worship can be a time of singing and dancing, of smiles and laughter, a time when barriers between us are broken down, when our reserve is allowed to slip just a bit. We might have something to learn from them.

Jesus has saved the best wine for now. There is plenty for everyone. Drink deeply. Enjoy the feast.