

**January 20, 2019 The Hapless Steward Homily:** One of the great Christian artists of the past has found humor in the events in the life of Christ. Consider the Italian painter, Giotto, whose works date back to the early fourteenth century. In one of his masterpieces, “The Wedding Feast of Cana”, the one figure in the fresco that first attracts your attention is the chief steward (or headwaiter). Overfed and overweight, he is depicted drinking wine... the wine that had earlier been water... from a large drinking cup, a goblet. He is a ridiculous figure and the object of ridicule. To understand why the artist makes him a rather pathetic figure we must first consider his role as, we would say today, the wedding planner. The chief steward was responsible for coordinating the wedding feast, which often lasted a week. For wine to run out at a wedding feast would have been a social disaster and have brought dishonor to the bride and groom’s family. At the wedding feast of Cana, the chief steward failed to keep track of the wine that was in short supply. The words of Mary, “They have no wine”, must have been unnerving to him. It was a singular moment of crisis and panic. At a loss for words, he is unable to give a satisfactory explanation for the embarrassing turn of events. In addition, he knows not who was responsible for providing the guests with the “good wine”, a superior vintage. The hapless chief steward may represent for Giotto those of us who are obtuse and clueless, and who fail to recognize the mystery of the divine presence in our daily life and the answers to some of life’s most vexing problems.

Enter Jesus. In the first of his signs in John’s gospel, Jesus reveals his power and his glory. The glory of which Scripture speaks repeatedly is the splendor of God who intervenes in history. “This is glory: the divine splendor which intervenes in history and is made visible”. (Carlo Martini, S.J.) The focus of the evangelist is what the signs reveal about Jesus and his identity. His power inspires respect and confidence in his disciples, who have faith in him. Jesus came to the feast not just as the village carpenter, but as the Messiah or the Christ.

In Jesus’ day, the all-powerful Roman emperors likened themselves to one of the gods of ancient antiquity, Dionysius, the god of winemaking. The pagans of Rome truly believed that it was Dionysius himself who supplied them with wine in abundance. To be without the “fruit of the gods” was catastrophic. The superstitious among the citizens of Rome would consider a paucity of wine to be a curse. No longer were they enjoying the favor of the gods.

In Sacred Scripture, wine, because of what it symbolizes, is one of God’s greatest gifts. It “gladdens the hearts” (Ps.104:15) and that of God Himself. It is a blessing from heaven. In the miracle worked by Jesus at the wedding feast, an incredible amount of wine is available to the guests once the miracle has been carried out: over 180 gallons. Wine in such abundance is a Messianic sign. Later in John’s gospel, Jesus declares that “he has come that they may have life and more abundantly”.(Jn.10:10) In bestowing his blessings, God is lavish in showering his people with gifts. God is the one who expends Himself completely for our joy.

In the celebration of Mass, we hear the priest repeat the words of Christ, “This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant”. If Our Lord has the power to change water into wine, has he not also the power to transform wine into his own precious blood? The English convert, Fr. Ronald Knox considers the words of an earlier convert, Richard Crashaw on the wedding feast of Cana to be one of the most sublime in Latin letters “The shame-faced water saw its God and blushed.” The waters in the jars blushed because no creature is worthy to see God face to face unless God himself gives him permission.

In our secular, unbelieving age, the words of Mary, “They have no wine” reflect exactly our present day situation. There is too much rage, hostility and disquiet in our contemporary culture. All too often we lack the joy of the gospel. And how often are we ready to blame others for our troubles and fail to take responsibility for our own actions?

Do we have the joy of the gospel in us? The disciples believed in him and experienced joy. (Jn2:12)

When was the last time we tasted the fruit of the vine?

Amen!