

2nd Sunday of the Year, Year C

I am offering two reflections. The first is a reflection on the Gospel. The second picks up one theme and develops it under the heading 'The sinful Church'.

Homily 1

The importance of the powerful and symbolic scene of Cana at the beginning of John's Gospel cannot be exaggerated. It stands in sharp contrast to the scene that immediately follows it, in which Jesus clears the temple. John is challenging us to choose. We can continue attempting to find our security in the religious system to which we have become accustomed, even though it is failing to produce the wine of the Spirit which is the fruit of communion with God, or we can listen to Jesus who assures us that God is truly the Bridegroom of our souls, that we are indeed loved, and that the wine of communion with God is there for the asking if, following the example of Nicodemus, we are willing to journey in the dark towards Jesus, the light of the world.

The symbolic significance of the marriage feast of Cana is brought out well in the First Reading from the scroll of Isaiah. It was composed for the Jews who had just experienced the miracle of the return from Exile. They felt forsaken, as we all can; they were inconsolable, having seen their country devastated by war, and their city and temple destroyed; but now they are back home with the opportunity of rebuilding their lives. As the prophet says:

'You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;
but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,
and your land Married;
for the LORD delights in you,
and your land shall be married.
For as a young man marries a young woman,
so shall your builder marry you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you'(Isaiah 62:4-5).

John is giving us a dramatic portrayal of this truth in the scene at Cana. The people want to celebrate, but find themselves without wine. Mary, symbolising every Jewish woman who has ever longed for the Messiah, comes to Jesus, and declares how empty their lives are without the wine of God's Spirit. They are going through the motions, but there is no zest and no experience of communion.

Jesus first response is to draw her, and us with her, to reflect on what it is we really want. What does it really mean for us to thirst for this wine? What has this thirst to do with Jesus? Do we realise what it is that we are asking for? There are many things for

which we thirst. Is our deepest thirst really for the communion that comes only from God?

Having insisted that we ponder what it we really want, Jesus goes on to assure her that there is nothing to worry about. God is about to pour out the promised Spirit over the people. He says, in what appears to me the better translation: 'Has not my hour now come?' The time for revealing God has come. It will be fully realised by the way Jesus gave himself in love from the cross, but it is about to commence. Mary is delighted, and offers us the perfect advice: 'Do whatever he tells you!'

In Jesus God is revealing himself as the Bridegroom of whom Isaiah spoke. Through Jesus God is about to pour out the Spirit of his love over the people – indeed over the whole world. However, since God is love, God cannot and will not force love upon anyone. It is essential that we 'believe', that is to say that we willingly welcome the love that is offered and 'be' in that 'love'. It is essential that we do all that we can to open ourselves and our world to the miracle of God's grace. It is wine that we desire – the wine of divine communion. However it is water jars that we have, so we must fill them with water, we must live our lives to the full as best we can, while waiting on the word of God's Messiah to transform our lives through the gift of the best wine, the wine of God's Spirit, the wine of communion with God the Bridegroom.

Last week the Church invited us to begin the period of 'Ordinary Time' by reflecting on baptism – Jesus' baptism and our own. Today, the Second Sunday, we are reminded of the essence of the Gospel – that God is love and that all God's love is being offered to us. We must, with Mary, acknowledge our need, and we must really want what God wants and be ready to follow God's inspiration, wherever it might lead us, knowing that God is, indeed, the Bridegroom of our soul, that we not forsaken and that God truly delights in us.

The central theme of today's readings is intimately connected with what we are doing here at the Eucharist. We come as we are, bringing our simple gifts, above all the gift of ourselves. We await God's word that will transform these gifts, and with them transform us, so that our lives will not be wasted in distraction or in empty religious ritual. We long to experience God as our Bridegroom, and to know how loved we are. Let us draw close to Jesus and welcome the gift of himself that he is offering us, for it is through him, with him and in him that we experience together the love-communion for which we long.

Homily 2: The sinful Church

The importance of the powerful and symbolic scene of Cana at the beginning of John's Gospel cannot be exaggerated. It stands in sharp contrast to the scene that immediately follows it, in which Jesus clears the temple. John is challenging us to choose. We can continue attempting to find our security in the religious system to which we have

become accustomed, even though it is failing to produce the wine of the Spirit which is the fruit of communion with God, or we can listen to Jesus who assures us that God is truly the Bridegroom of our souls, that we are indeed loved, and that the wine of communion with God is there for the asking if, following the example of Nicodemus, a man of the temple, we are willing to journey in the dark towards Jesus, the light of the world.

The Jews who chose to follow Jesus did not abandon the temple. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke writes: 'Day by day, they spent much time together in the temple. They broke bread (an early reference to the Eucharist) at home'(Acts 2:46). However there was a radical shift in the place of the temple in the life of the Christian community. When people who were not Jews joined the community, they shared the Eucharist with their Jewish brothers and sisters in a Christian home, but they did not go to the temple. It was no longer the central symbol of the Christian faith.

St Paul speaks of the Christian Church as the new Temple of the Holy Spirit. Because it is the Spirit of Christ - the love Jesus shares with the Father - that gives life to the community, he spoke of the Church as 'the Body of Christ'.

Is the contrast between the love-celebration of Cana, and the temple which Jesus empties, calling us, once again, to choose between the institution which is not offering wine and the bridegroom of our souls? Are we, today, once again, hearing Jesus calling us to leave the temple and to come to him to find rest for our souls (Matthew 11:28-29)? When Jesus said he was offering himself to nourish us many of his disciples left him. Jesus turned to the apostles and asked: 'Will you, too, go away?' Peter's reply has echoed down through the centuries and rings out again today: 'To whom will we go. You have the words of eternal life'(John 6:68).

There is a major difference of course between Jesus and the Church. Jesus was sinless, the Christian community, the Church, is not, and never has been. Jesus ate with sinners then, and he still eats with us sinners now. The fact that there are sinners in the Church, and the fact that the Church itself as an institution sins, are not good reasons for abandoning the community. With all its sin, the Church is and always will be the Body of Christ in the world, the Temple of the Spirit that is the love-communion between Jesus and his Father.

In 1947, just two years after the end of the Second World War, the Jesuit Karl Rahner, arguably the greatest theologian of the last century, published an article entitled: 'The Church of sinners'. He speaks of the holiness of the Church, the holiness which we acknowledge in our Creed when we declare: 'I believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church'. The holiness of the Church is obvious (think of the sacraments, think of the saints you know, think of the astonishing heroism of so many of her members, including here in this parish). The source of this holiness is not us; it is Jesus who is keeping his promise to be with us to the end of time (Matthew 28:20).

Rahner goes on to speak of the obvious fact that there are sinners (including us) in the Church, and that the Church is not only holy, but also sinful. Down through the centuries, and again today, the Church as an institution, sins. If we have too idealistic a picture of the Church, acknowledging this fact can be shattering. It can bring about an inner struggle in us, especially, if we take our eyes off Jesus and focus on sin. Being holy is what God's graces the Church to be. Sin happens when we fail to welcome this grace. Holiness defines what the Church is. Sin acknowledges the presence of human, all too human, failure. My sins, your sins, are sins of the Church. We need to remind ourselves that the sinful church is surrounded by God's mercy. Jesus embraced Judas in the garden. He continues to embrace us, and the sinful Church, offering us the only remedy for our sin - his love.

Rahner concludes his article by referring to the scene in John 8 where the Scribes and Pharisees cast a woman down into the dust at Jesus' feet. They had caught her in the act of adultery and challenged him to do respond. He sees the woman as the Church. I quote:

'The Scribes and the Pharisees – they exist not only in the Church but everywhere and in every guise – will always haul 'the woman' before the Lord. Secretly delighted that 'the woman' is after all not any better than they are themselves, they will accuse her: 'Lord, this woman has been discovered in the very act of adultery. What do you say?' She will not be able to deny it. No, it is a scandal. And there are no extenuating circumstances. She thinks of her sins, because she has really committed them, and in doing so she forgets the hidden and the manifest glory of her holiness. She has no intention of denying her sins. She is the poor Church of sinners. Her humility, without which she would not be holy, knows only of her guilt. And she stands before him whose bride she is, before him who has loved her and sacrificed himself for her in order to make her holy, before him who knows her sins better than any of her accusers. He remains silent. He writes her sins in the sands of the world's history, sands which will soon be wiped out, and her sins with it. He remains silent for as short while which to us can seem like a thousand years. He passes judgment on this woman only through the silence of his love which pardons and absolves.

Throughout the centuries new accusers stand beside 'this woman', and they always slip away again, beginning with the eldest; for never has anyone been found who was without sin. And at the end the Lord will be alone with the woman. And then he will stand erect and look upon this prostitute, his bride, and ask her, 'Woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you? And she will answer with inexpressible repentance and humility, 'No one, Lord.' And she will be astonished and almost dismayed that no one has done so. But the Lord will come close to her and say, 'Then neither will I condemn you.' He will kiss her forehead and murmur, 'My bride, my holy Church'(269).

We must acknowledge the sin that we find in the Church - most especially our own. And we must learn to repent, praying not to sin again. The Church is rightly called our 'Mother'. In today's Gospel, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the only one other than her son who is without sin, speaks for every Jewish mother who longed for the Messiah. She tells Jesus: 'We have run out of wine'. She goes on to tell the servants: 'Do whatever he tells you'. Let us pray to her to renew our love for Jesus, and so our love for the community that is given life by his Spirit and it his sacrament here on earth. Mary was there again when the heart of her Son was being pierced on the Cross. She is still standing as the Church experiences the piercing of its heart, the piercing brought about by our sins.