

Second Sunday after Epiphany

17th JANUARY 2016

“There was a marriage in Cana of Galilee: and the mother of Jesus was there.
And Jesus also was invited, and his disciples, to the marriage.”

– *St. John 2:1-2.*



The Lord's first miracle, the changing of water into wine at the marriage feast of Cana, is a real historical event with a deep symbolic meaning. We might almost say it is a lived parable. And as with any of Our Lord's miracles or parables, there is so much meaning that we need to focus on one small aspect at a time in order to see clearly without being blinded by the light. Quite aside from its mystical significance and quite apart from everything this incident teaches us about Mary's role in salvation, this first sign worked by the Redeemer highlights the dignity of Christian marriage.

It is not by chance that Christ chose to launch his public ministry at a wedding festival. The Son of God who refused to turn stone into bread at the prompting of the devil disdains not to turn water into wine at the prompting of his Mother. He did so not merely to relieve a temporal want, but to show the great dignity of marriage. Marriage is such an important part of God's plan that when he became incarnate, he often used marriage to explain the nature of God's kingdom. How many parables begin, “the kingdom of heaven is likened to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son”? Already in the Old Testament, God showed himself to Israel as the bridegroom: “I will espouse thee to me in faith” (Osee 2:20), which is why the repeated idolatries of the Chosen People strike at God's heart as so many spiritual adulteries. Now, the Word, who made marriage “in the beginning” at the creation of our first parents, honours a marriage festival with his very presence.

And what is marriage exactly? Marriage is not just a way to satisfy some emotional need two people may feel, it is not merely a response to the personal qualities which first draw people together: because appearances fade, emotions pass, but grace ripens. We live in dark days, when this holy institution is threatened by enemies outside and even inside the Church, as if man had the right to replace the good wine of God's grace with the bad wine that leads only to the drunkenness of self-love followed by the headache of societal collapse.

Marriage is the lifelong union of one man and one woman, a union ordered by its very nature to bringing new life into the world and raising up future citizens of heaven. Christ was present at this marriage feast to show both that he approves of marriage and that marriage must follow God's plan. As St. Paul had predicted to Timothy (*cf.* I Timothy 4:3), in the early Church gnostic sects

arose which viewed the flesh as evil and forbade marriage. At the other extreme, fallen human nature being what it is, there has always been lurking below the surface and now paraded in public places, a false view which makes marriage all about personal desire. It is very touching to read in the Old Testament about the wedding of Sarah and Tobit in order to see the contrast between the godly and humanist view of marriage that existed even then: “we are the children of saints, and we must not be joined together like heathens that know not God” (Tobit 8:5).

Well-meaning Catholics sometimes go astray by saying things like, “of course, I personally believe that marriage is a sacrament, but that is because I am a Christian, so I would never dream of imposing this view on the rest of society.” The fact of the matter is that marriage is a part of human nature as such; it is not primordially a supernatural dogma like transubstantiation. That is, Christ our Lord did not *create* marriage; he ratified and restored the institution of marriage that had existed from the beginning and he *raised it* to the dignity of a sacrament: above and beyond what it already was by nature.

The Catholic marriage liturgy sums this up beautifully in one of the prayers, which says: “O God, by whom woman is joined to man, and the partnership, ordained from the beginning, is endowed with such blessing that *it alone was not withdrawn either by the punishment of original sin, nor by the sentence of the flood*: graciously look upon this Thy handmaid, who, about to be joined in wedlock, seeks Thy defence and protection.”

The essential nature of marriage – which for Christians is *also* a sacrament, a cause of God’s grace – is fundamentally the same for all people. As a natural institution, marriage is pre-political: that means no one can change its essential meaning – not an individual, not the state, not even the Church. Because marriage exists primarily for the transmission of new life, the prohibition against artificial contraception is not just a taboo, not simply a discipline created by the Church, like fasting on Ember days. This natural truth has been confirmed by revelation. To quote holy Tobit once again: “Thou madest Adam of the slime of the earth, and gavest him Eve for a helper. And now, Lord, thou knowest, that not for fleshly lust do I take this maiden to wife, but only for the love of posterity, in which thy name may be blessed for ever and ever” (Tobit 8:4-9).

Until 1930, when the Anglican bishops at the Lambeth Conference first decided they had the authority to change wine into water by changing God’s word and authorising the use of contraception, *all* Christians in *all* denominations had agreed with the Church that such a thing was contrary to God’s plan. The Catholic Church, being founded by God and not by man, could obviously not just follow this trend, and so Pope Pius XI, conscious of the

grave duty that a pope has to speak with clarity in times of moral confusion, reiterated God's unchanging truth: "the Catholic Church, to whom God has entrusted the defence of the integrity and purity of morals," he said, "standing upright in the midst of the moral ruin which surrounds her, in order that she may preserve the chastity of the nuptial union from being defiled by this foul stain, raises her voice in token of her divine ambassadorship and through our mouth proclaims anew: any use whatsoever of matrimony exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life is an offense against the law of God and of nature, and those who indulge in such are branded with the guilt of a grave sin" (*Casti Connubii*, 56). In 1968, Pope Paul VI added to this intrinsic reason a warning about the consequences of contraception, a warning that sadly has gone unheeded and has had such tragic consequences. He said, "a man who grows accustomed to the use of contraceptive methods may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection" (*Humanae vitae*, 17). Forty years have shown him to be a prophet.

The Church, faithful to her divine Spouse, has always understood that artificial birth control involves a lie. By coming together as man and wife, a married couple seem to say to each other, "I give myself to you entirely; I hold nothing back," but by using contraception what they are really saying is: "I love you *just enough* to use you, but I certainly do not love you enough to trust you with an unknown future." Marriage is an act of faith: faith above all in God's plan. "Know ye that the Lord he is God: he made us, and not we ourselves" (Ps. 99:3). He made us, and he made marriage. An act of faith also in an unknown future: what joys, what sorrows, what tender caresses from yet-unborn children, what long nights at the bedside of them when they are ill, what expectations entrusted to the Lord, what disappointments accepted to lighten his cross. Let us pray that Jesus and Mary will always be invited our wedding celebrations. Let us pray today for all those who have been broken – emotionally and spiritually – by the lies of autonomy which have done so much to destroy marriage. Let us pray that young people will have the courage to be heroic in living a life of purity; let us pray that those who have for a time followed the lies may still be able to participate in the eternal wedding banquet by making a good confession now while they still have time. When following God's liberating law seems difficult – and our fallen human nature means that sometimes it *is* difficult – let us all follow Mary's advice from today's Gospel: "do whatsoever he tells you" (St. John 2:5).