

A couple in Chicago decided to visit Florida in order to thaw out from the particularly cold winter. They planned to stay at the same hotel where they had honey-mooned 20 years earlier. Their busy schedules, however, made it impossible for the couple to travel together. So the husband flew to Florida on Thursday, and his wife planned to arrive the following day. The husband checked into the hotel and decided to email his wife from the hotel's business center. However, he mistyped her email address.

Meanwhile in Dallas, a widow who had just returned home from her husband's funeral checked her email, expecting messages of condolences from relatives and friends. She read the first message, screamed, and fainted.

The widow's son rushed into the room, found his mother on the floor, and saw this on the computer screen:

TO: My Loving Wife

FROM: Your Departed Husband

SUBJECT: I've arrived

I know you're surprised to hear from me so soon, but they have computers here now and I thought I'd let you know I'm already here and have been checked in.

Everything is ready for your arrival tomorrow.

PS. It's really hot down here!

And do you want to hear a really bad joke? Two TV antennas got married. Apparently the wedding was terrible, but the reception was excellent! Well – it's a tie-in with today's Gospel – a wedding reception that went from a near disaster to a roaring success. And it became a roaring success, of course, because Jesus was there.

This Gospel story is a theological motherlode. I'm just going to tease out a tiny bit of its richness. Throughout the Old Testament, the motif of the wedding is used to symbolize the marriage of God and His people as well as the good cheer that comes with a wedding. So it is a great expression of the overcoming of the divisions caused by sin. It is no accident that in John's Gospel, Jesus' first public 'sign' takes place at a wedding feast, for Jesus Himself is the marriage of divinity and humanity.

The story begins with a recurring Johannine code: "ON THE THIRD DAY, there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee..." (Jn 2:1). Throughout the Gospel, on the third day is the expression for the day of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. More to the point, this marriage feast takes place in Cana OF GALILEE, and Galilee, in the symbolic system of John, is the country of resurrection, that place where Jesus would meet His friends after Easter. Therefore, this story must be read through the lens of the resurrection, which is to say, the act by which God gathered humanity to Himself and began the process of gathering of all humankind – "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died" as we read in 1 Cor 14:20. The wedding feast of Cana and the wedding feast of the resurrection interpret one another.

We hear that the disciples of Jesus were invited to the wedding along with Jesus and His mother. The presence of the disciples and the mother are key. In calling disciples to Himself, Jesus has already begun the gathering of His people – with the Twelve seen as reminding us of the 12 tribes of Israel – their presence shows that this has now begun -- and that this is why Jesus came.

Mary is a rich and many-layered symbolic figure in all of the Gospels. Presented with many different angles in Matthew, Mark and Luke, in John's Gospel, she is, above all, mother – the physical mother of Jesus, and, through Him, the mother of all who would come to new life in Him. As mother of the Lord, she is, once again, Israel, that entire series of events and system of ideas from which Jesus emerged and in terms of which He alone becomes understandable. Mary would have effectively awakened the messianic consciousness of Jesus through her recounting of the story of Israel to her son. So in the Cana story, Mary will speak the pain and the hope of the chosen people, scattered and longing for union. (adapted from Robert Barron, THE PRIORITY OF CHRIST, pages not noted)

Second, we are told that in the course of the wedding celebration, “The wine gave out” (Jn 2:3) In an era when such parties lasted for several days, this was not a minor difficulty – it was a disaster. With the wine depleted, the celebration would crash to a halt, and the hosts, as well as the bride and groom, would be profoundly embarrassed.

And then that most odd of responses of Jesus when Mary tells Him of the lack of wine: “What is this to me and to you?” It asks how we include in our lives those we might otherwise forget as we go about the business of our lives. It is an idiom in the Semitic language. It asks: Do we have something in common between us here? It probes: What business is that of ours? Or perhaps: How does that involve ME – and not just you? Or, as in this question: How are WE involved? It asks if there is any common concern here or even a common passion in which we are united, in which we come together into a ‘we.’ What is here to unite us in common concern, a single identity in a care that we share? Why are we involved? How is this a concern of me and you?

Jesus' question looks like a refusal, but that is not quite right. We note that no request has been made. Mary simply comments, the way anyone might, that the wine has run out. There is no directive, no command. No request is made of her son. The mother notices the embarrassment, the pain of others, and presents it to Jesus. But He reads much more than that into her comment. Jesus transforms her remark and takes it as if it were a request. He then meets a request that has not been made with what seems to be its refusal. He refers to Mary, His mother, as ‘woman’ -- the way ‘woman’ would appear in John 19 before the cross, and in the sign that appears in the heavens in Revelation 12. ‘Woman’ transposes the symbolic significance of this interchange into what it is to become for all times and all places. Mary becomes the symbol of the entire church.

Mary ignores the refusal that seems to have been made of a request that had not been put, and carries this interchange deeper, ignoring the surface meaning of what Jesus has just said. In Bultmann's words: “The mother has understood her son: all she can do now is to await the miracle worker. So she directs the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them.” (THE GOSPEL OF JOHN: A COMMENTARY, Rudolf Bultmann, p. 117) Mary understands that this couple's concern touches Him so much that she can direct the servers to a more general openness and availability: “Do whatever He commands you.” This is what we as Catholics have always known about Mary – she has influence with her Son -- and this is why we pray for her intercession.

We can look at many times in history in which the influence of Mary has made the influence of Jesus both present and directive in a way it otherwise might not have been. In the Guadalupe culture of Mexico. In

the piety of 19th century France at Lourdes. In the ordinary piety and understanding of Catholics for centuries when the liturgy was in Latin, translations forbidden, the Eucharist at a great distance and seldom received, and much of the clergy lost in class isolation. We feel this in our bones, and we know from our history that Mary always aligns with the poor and the unlettered, giving them a unique and powerful access to Jesus. Mary's symbolic presence and influence has kept them Catholic in a deeper sense than may have met a theologian's eye. This is the mystery and source of authentic Marian piety: Mary giving birth to Jesus, her endless service to the church.

Third and finally, our place in this story. This question of Jesus continues through history to stand before His mother, and in her, to stand before us, the church: "How are we involved in the needs of these people?" It is of great importance to the life and mission of the church that we hear this question. For it has been and is shockingly easy not to hear or see human misery or to take it for granted as 'just the way it is.' (adapted from Michael J. Buckley, SJ, WHAT DO YOU SEEK? P. 70-73)

We can be so isolated that we become incapable of hearing this call in any way that asks anything of us, in a way that would give us a whole new understanding of reality. When we isolate ourselves from the insecurity and pain of others, we can easily find ourselves alienated from the lived experience, the anxieties, and the deep needs of the poor. We can see migrant workers bent over in the fields but not let it impinge upon our life -- or tear at our sensibilities. We can hear talk of mass deportation of our Latino brothers and sisters and hide behind immoral laws that strip them of their dignity, divide their families, and force them back into situations of danger, hunger, and death.

But this distance destroys our conscience as basic human beings, let alone followers of Jesus Christ. We are supposed to have a common ground, a common concern that unites us with Christ in the poor, but we easily move in isolation from them and in emotional indifference. "If they would just get in line; if they would just follow the law." Tell that to someone who walked thousands of miles carrying an infant over mountains and through deserts to try to save their lives from certain starvation or death. If, unlike Mary, we do not appropriate with some depth of experience and passion the needs of others, we become less and less those who can even hear the question contained within the human situation that is being addressed to us, less and less those who can turn to the Lord with any experienced poignancy and say: "They have no wine." The statement is a question about life itself.

We have only to raise our eyes to see this poverty and suffering.

Those parents who watch their children grow up without education, without much hope for a better life, the migrants who shift with the crops, knowing bitterly that their children are condemned to repeat the lives of their parents: "They have no wine."

The millions of old, hidden away in our cities or in dreary convalescent homes-- "They have no wine."

The despised or feared or uneducated -- men and women, the impoverished Spanish speakers, Native Americans, and African Americans, whose lives are terrorized by the violence on their streets and the hopelessness of ever getting enough education or capital to escape -- "They have no wine."

Women demeaned and threatened in almost every city in the world, by violence and their disproportionate level of financial insecurity, patronized and discriminated against at the highest level of decision making even within the church, and by their level of poverty in the world -- "They have no wine."

In all this misery, the question of Jesus returns us back to ourselves: “What is this to me and to you?” What is this world of sorrow to us? How should it shape our lives?

As I was working on this homily, a very concrete example of how pervasive this is, was given to me. Our Administrator, Noelle, walked into my office and said: “We have been doing some studying of trends and statistics in our parish. Did you know that 43% of the parish has contributed NOTHING – not a penny – in the last 18 months?” Obviously 43% have answered that ‘this is nothing to us.’ So are we Catholic or not? Followers of Jesus or not? Givers to life – or those who suck out whatever we can wherever we can?

Christians become more Christian as we realize in ourselves the mysterious promise that is the church – and what it means to become church. The church becomes more itself the more it realizes the call of the mother of God in her appropriation of the pain and sorrow of others. This may be the embarrassment of a wedding couple, or the pain of her son at His death, or those around us crying out for help. The church becomes more the church as the pain of the human race comes more and more into our consciousness and actions, our experience and understanding. “They have no wine.” We need to do what Jesus tells us to do. Take care of them. All of them. No exceptions. Amen. (last section adapted from Michael J. Buckley, SJ, *What DO YOU SEEK?* , p. 73-75)