

God of the Possible

John 2:1-12

10th Sunday in Pentecost

1st August 2010

Well, the wedding of Chelsea Clinton and Marc Mevinsky in Rhinebeck, New York, is over ... at last ... thank goodness. After all the build-up in the media, it was a bit of a let-down because we didn't get to see anything of it. They didn't even cover the ceremony on TV. What was that all about? Surely, CNN which covers everything, from oil spills to earthquakes, should have been allowed to present the nuptials in their usual minute-by-minute detail. Doesn't the public have a right to know everything about everything these days?

Actually, the Clinton wedding was so hush-hush, it made us wonder what incentives or disincentives had been offered to stop people spilling the beans in advance. People were sworn to such secrecy that the only certifiably factual information was that Gennifer Flowers, Paula Jones and Monica Lewinsky had not been invited!

I must admit that I was quite amazed by the comment of one society wedding planner who, when asked by a foreign TV interviewer why the wedding of Chelsea Clinton was such a big deal, said, "Oh, my dear, you have to understand that the Clintons are royalty in America and this is going to be the wedding of the century." First of all, I thought that the Kennedys were America's royal family. Do they have two royal families down there? Second, isn't it a bit too premature to say that this is the wedding of the century when we are only at 2010? There's another 90 years still to go for more celebrated weddings to take place. What about President Obama's daughters when they get married? Or, just suppose, in the future, America's first female president was to get married during her term in office? Now, that would be the wedding of the century.

Of course, the wedding of the century might just take place outside the US. What about the marriage of Prince William to Kate Middleton when that happens? Or what about an even more important wedding than any of these that is to take place in a few weeks right here in Ontario? The wedding of a young lady I know. I may be biased but I can assure you that that will definitely be the wedding of the century!

Looking back at celebrated weddings of the past, I wonder which you consider the most memorable of all time. Maybe it was the wedding of Justin Trudeau and Sophie Gregoire, or Prince Charles and Princess Diana, or Prince Rainier and Grace Kelly, or the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh. Or, maybe it was your own wedding.

Then, again, maybe the most memorable wedding of all is a fictitious one. Like the one Edward Lear imagined in his famous poem "The Owl and the Pussycat".¹ Strange but romantic.

1. The Owl and the Pussycat went to sea
In a beautiful pea green boat,
They took some honey, and plenty of money,
Wrapped up in a five pound note.

2. The Owl looked up to the stars above,
And sang to a small guitar,
'O lovely Pussy! O Pussy my love,
What a beautiful Pussy you are,
You are, you are!
What a beautiful Pussy you are!'

3. Pussy said to the Owl,
'You elegant fowl!
How charmingly sweet you sing!
O let us be married! too long we have tarried:
But what shall we do for a ring?'

4. They sailed away, for a year and a day,
To the land where the Bong-tree grows.
And there in a wood a Piggy-wig stood
With a ring at the end of his nose,
His nose, his nose,
With a ring at the end of his nose.

5. 'Dear pig, are you willing to sell for one shilling Your ring?' Said the Piggy, 'I will.'
So they took it away, and were married next day
By the Turkey who lives on the hill.

6. They dined on mince, and slices of quince,
Which they ate with a runcible spoon;²
And then hand in hand, on the edge of the sand,
They danced by the light of the moon,
The moon, the moon,
They danced by the light of the moon.

Probably, of course, the most memorable wedding of all was the one that took place in Cana of Galilee. The one we read about in the Bible today. The one that Jesus attended. The one that has kept people talking for over 2000 years. The one that was remembered because not only was there a hitch but a glitch. "What can go wrong will go wrong," says Murphy's Law and it certainly did that day because the most embarrassing thing happened. The wine ran out. Someone seriously underestimated the number and the thirst of the guests.

Jesus' mother, Mary, knowing that her son – of all people present – was the very person to take care of this problem, suggested he do something. But, strangely, he was less than helpful. "What's this got to do with me?" he said, brushing her off. "Don't tell me what to do. My time has not yet come." Which seemed uncharacteristically rude of Jesus. No way to treat his mother, of course, unless he had a twinkle in his eye when he spoke to her – as sons

often do!

But, no matter, Jesus quickly changed his mind – maybe he was even a bit scared of his mother – and quickly did the right thing. He got hold of some large stone jars, had them filled with water and somehow, beyond our understanding, bypassed the laws of fermentation, and changed the water into wine. Much to the joy of the guests since the amount produced was somewhere between 120-180 gallons of wine – enough to keep about 2400-3600 people very well lubricated.³ More than even the Clintons would have needed yesterday!

Now, though this wedding took place centuries ago and the turning of the water into wine has become famous in the time since, what's the meaning of it all in today's world, for our lives in the 21st century?

When Johnny Carson was the host of *The Tonight Show*, he once interviewed an 8 year old boy who had been invited to appear because he had rescued 2 friends from a coal-mine near his home in West Virginia. As Carson questioned the boy, it became apparent that he was a Christian. So Johnny asked him if attended Sunday School and, when he said he did, he asked what he was learning in Sunday School. "Last week," the boy replied, "our lesson was about when Jesus went to a wedding and turned water into wine." The audience roared with laughter but Johnny kept a straight face. "And what did you learn from that story?" The boy squirmed. Obviously caught off-guard. But then suddenly inspiration struck, his little face lit up, and he replied brightly, "This story teaches you that if you are going to have a wedding, make sure you invite Jesus!"

Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings! Isn't that exactly one of the important things we should take from this story. Make Jesus a part of your wedding. And, even more, make Jesus a part of the marriage that comes afterwards.

Undoubtedly, whenever we discuss this story, it faces us with the question of miracles. The turning of water into wine has become known as Jesus' first public miracle, but did a miracle really take place that day? Or, was there some more straightforward, natural explanation? Were the laws of nature contravened by what Jesus did or was he acting in accordance with some higher physical laws of which we humans are not yet aware?

And what about today? Do miracles still happen in our day and age? What about that seriously ill friend inexplicably healed after conventional medicine had run its course? Or, what about that chronic financial problem suddenly resolved against all the odds? Or, what about that job opportunity that suddenly came up after years of being in the wrong job? What about numerous events like this that happen against the laws of nature, against expectations, against the flow of normality?

Of course, the very idea of miracles presents us with all sorts of intellectual challenges that are very difficult to resolve. But before we dismiss them as inexplicable

aberrations simply because we can't work out the physical details, let's see their meaning in a broader sense, reminding us again of the basic truth of the Christian Faith that all things are possible with God.

Sometimes when I am leading the Prayer of Concern during our morning service, I will ask myself whether it really is right to pray for peace between Israelis and Palestinians or between the Taleban and government forces in Afghanistan. For we know that, with the level of hostilities in both these situations, it would take a miracle to change things. So, really we are praying to God for a miracle and I wonder if it is right to do this. Are we not coming before God with unrealistic expectations?

But, then, I remember years ago praying for certain things to happen in the world that seemed at that time to need just as great a miracle: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, the dismantling of apartheid, peace in Northern Ireland. And when I think of the way these events have come about against all reasonable human expectations, then I think to myself that maybe it is not so unrealistic to pray for a miracle of peace to happen in today's troubled countries.

Maybe, then, the most important thing we can take from this "Galilean Wedding to be Remembered" is a message of hope for our lives and for our world today. Despite all indications to the contrary, all things are still possible with God. As the words of Thomas Cowper's famous hymn puts it, "God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform, he plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm."⁴

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¹ Edward Lear, "The Owl and the Pussycat", 1871

² "Runcible" was a nonsense word invented by Edward Lear. Several attempts have been made to define exactly what such a spoon is – a spoon designed for children, a spoon with serrated edges for eating grapefruit. Lear admits that he didn't know himself what he really meant by this word which he uses in other poems, in other contexts.

³ John, the Gospel writer, tells us there were six stone jars, each large enough to hold 20-30 gallons. This would be, overall, 120-180 gallons of wine. Now, based on average wine consumption of 1 gallon supplying enough for every 20 people, this means that either there were between 2400 – 3600 guests at the wedding in Cana or, if there were fewer guests, they each consumed vast quantities. The amount of wine on its own would certainly seem to have made this a wedding to be remembered!

⁴ William Cowper, "God moves in a mysterious way", #55, *The Book of Praise*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada.