

"THE FIRST OF HIS SIGNS"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
Third Sunday In Lent
March 22, 1987

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TEXT: "This, the first of His signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him" (John 2: 11)

INTRODUCTION

Thus far in Lent this year, we have spent time reviewing the first temptation of Jesus in the wilderness of Judea and the first sermon He preached in Galilee. Again this morning, I would like to turn to a "first" in His life and would consider with you the first miracle He performed with the intent of letting some of its meaning touch our lives.

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"How our Lord enters into the troubles of people; how unbelievably He suffices in every difficulty; and above all, how He enriches things for us."

This miracle illustrates all of this, or as one commentary puts it:

"What water is to wine...what that embarrassing insufficiency was to the relief He wrought for His host, so is any other life compared to the fullness, the color, the adventure, the achievement that He gives to us."

DEVELOPMENT

But if that is the main lesson, there are many other thoughts that leap out at us arrestingly as we move to a closer look at it.

To begin with, there is the fact that Christ was there at this wedding; that they wanted Him to be there; that He felt it important to be at such a joyous and happy occasion. He didn't send a gift and a card and fail to show up. He was present. Apparently those who invited Him had no fear that He would be "out of His element", or fail to fit in, or make others uncomfortable, as John the Baptist with his asceticism would have done.

And be sure there was no awkward silence at that part of the table where He sat. There was joy and laughter. For Christ did not hold aloof from innocent human happiness - a fact which many of His followers have forgotten, sometimes with tragic results, making His religion a more austere thing than He ever did, scaring many from Him who are His by natural right.

They say that St. Theresa disliked "gloomy people" and prayed to be delivered from those "frowning saints" and was herself in spite of her devotion - rather because of her devotion and as a part of it - a gay, happy-hearted, fun-loving person. A nun once wrote of her:

"Sometimes she would speak of the weightiest subjects; at

other times, she would say things for our entertainment; sometimes she would make up verses, and very good ones, too."

Jesus went to a wedding. He felt it was important to be there. A marriage is always enhanced by social reinforcement. Friends provide a context in which the sacral character of life is expressed and strengthened. And if we read carefully between the lines, He had himself a time...a good time while there.

MOTHER OF JESUS

And then there is the kindness of the mother of Jesus. She appears to have been on terms of intimacy with the family. Cana was near to Nazareth, perhaps only a couple of miles away. And no doubt Mary noticed the whispering and the growing embarrassment and understood at once that there was something wrong; that quite probably because Jesus and His party had been invited on their arrival in town, there had been a miscalculation, and the host's hospitality was likely to be shamed. There was a shortage of wine!

Therefore, at once and with great confidence she appealed to her son and whispered encouragingly to the servants who were flustered over the shrinking supply which quite obviously now was going to be hopelessly insufficient. "Do whatever He tells you". Or, in effect, "He'll find some way to solve this problem". And indeed, He himself had noticed and was preparing to take action at the right moment.

But one is glad for her spontaneous, unconscious tribute to Him. For the silent years are very silent and the veil that cuts us off from them is quite thick. We know so little about those years when He was growing up in that Nazareth home. This confidence of Mary in Him could only have come out of long experience of One always unselfish, thoughtful, dependably unfailing and ingenious in helpfulness. Mary taught Him one of those wonderful lessons we would do well to learn, "Always do what's expected...plus a little bit more".

Yes, that instinctive appeal of His mother, that quiet confidence of Mary in Jesus tells us much. And we had better remember that a religion which does not tell on our home life and make us thoughtful and unselfish there, in the living out of those little things that make up our days at home, is gravely suspect.

Lyman Abbott once laid it down that "to be a follower of Christ is to join with Him in fulfilling His mission as He Himself defined it". And how did He define it? By His teaching. And those teachings may all be summed up in one word: helpfulness. Christianity - with all of its loftiness of thought and speculation - is a very practical thing. Helpfulness, dear friend, is a key word!

ANOTHER THOUGHT

Another thought to turn over in your mind is that Jesus went to Cana even though He was committed to a mighty cause. He wasn't there as the Officiating Rabbi. He was there as a friend.

Remember that Jesus was just back from the struggle in the wilderness - that intense time of inner struggle and testing. Mark you, He was at a very important point in His life - choosing men, mapping His strategy. He probably had the feeling that His time was limited, tight, days numbered. And yet, there He was - relaxing, enjoying Himself. It's always a joy to meet people who have a

cause without being boring about it, people who have a burning vision in their hearts, but who do not set out to dominate the life of every soul around them.

As one reads the Gospels, he is impressed by the fact that the life of Jesus was laced with intervals of pleasant and social involvement with others. This may not say anything to you, but it speaks to me because I find myself occasionally confronted with "one-cause" zealots who insist on administering their loyalty tests. All of the causes are good and needful of our support, and certainly one would like to be counted in the proper columns and be supportive of all gatherings conducted by the causes, but sometimes this is difficult and sometimes it can conflict with an event spent with friends or family, relaxing in pleasant fellowship.

It was Mozart who said of himself, "My rests are more important than my notes". I was having lunch some time ago with a businessman who like so many of you keeps a fairly heavy and tightly scheduled week. He said something I recall:

"You know it is so important that one have a sense of leisure. A sense of leisure can be even more important than leisure itself".

Jesus began His public ministry by finding time to attend a wedding feast and He ended it by sitting down for supper with friends in an Upper Room. In between, He found time to eat with Zacchaeus and many others...time for visits to the home of Mary and Martha, time also for a big picnic with a crowd of friends on a grassy hillside. Had He done nothing more than grace this wedding with His presence, we would have cause for thanks and grateful remembrance. But He did more!

HE RESCUED IT He not only graced the occasion. He rescued it. A crisis developed when the wine ran out. Perhaps He and His friends were responsible for the shortage. The supply was depleted when they arrived on the scene. Alerted to the need by His mother, He commanded that six stone jars be filled to the top. He asked the servants to draw. And when they did, it was wine and not water that they drew out. And the wine was of such quality that a veteran steward who had been to many a party was moved to remark, "Why, you have kept the good wine until now."

I have no trouble in believing in the miraculous here. In fact, I find it quite like Jesus. He wouldn't turn the stones into bread for Himself, but He did turn water into wine for other people. My faith does not rest on this miracle, but it easily extends to this miracle. Why should one doubt it? Each Spring in the vineyards of the world, God draws up water from the ground and transforms the pungent juices of the grape. Maybe we should leave it to the poet who said: "The modest water saw its God and blushed."

AS A SIGN IT POINTS As a sign, it pointed beyond itself to something else. Symbolically, it was suggesting that the ministry of Jesus was to be a ministry of replacement.

Those six jars represented the Old Testament ceremonial religion. Pans and utensils were washed by religious prescription with water from those jars. Henceforth, those jars are to be filled no longer with water, but with the new wine of the Gospel of Jesus. "He came not to destroy, but to fulfill". "You have heard

it said, but now I say unto you". "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give Him shall never thirst".

The sign was not only pointing to this ministry of replacement, but also to the truth that Jesus had come into the world to restore the quality of our life to change the water into the wine of life.

MAIN LESSON

The main lesson is the glory that Christ brings with Him and offers to anyone who will accept it from Him - a life that is an abundant life, a peace that passes understanding, a fullness of joy that only He can give, and that produces an astonishment in its recipients like the bewilderment of the steward of the feast. This is always the characteristic note of the New Testament. Always its people keep bursting in on us - eyes shining, hearts on fire, crying:

"We've found it. The thing for which the whole world has been searching. It works. Do you go down before you temptations? So did we, but not now....with this wonderful Saviour to bring us through!

Do you find life too difficult for you? So did we, but not now...with the amplitudes of grace there are for us in Christ.

Or, is it thin and pinched and tame? With grace and with Christ and "in Christ", it grows satisfying and successful and exciting beyond measure...it becomes another and a richer thing."

It was because the early Christians felt that, said that, proved that, that they drew others to their faith. It is because we are so dull and unexcited over it that others look at us and think, "There's nothing to it or in it..." and turn away. Said Nietzsche and with good reason:

"They must sing better songs ere I learn belief in their Saviour. His disciples must look like the saved...and act like the saved."

I believe the only way in which we shall bring others to Christ is by convincing those outside that we have something infinitely valuable that they lack. Then of themselves they will come running for a share in it. Remember, our deeds speak far louder than our words. And that we do possess such a unique thing is the truth set down with vividness in this telling "frontispiece".

OUR TASK THEN

Our task then - individually - if He has truly turned the water of our life into wine, is to share it with others...to go forth to raise the quality of life around us, always keeping alive before the world the option of a better way. Having felt the life-giving touch and power of Christ, we are then called by Him to let that wine of His spill over into other lives.

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out but pure water. Each man had apparently said to himself:

"What difference will it make? My contribution is of no great importance. The quality of my wine is so weak that it will spill the quality of the rest. If I just put in some water, what I do will not be noticed....it will not be missed."

Don't ever believe it. Your contribution is of great importance...whatever it may be. He calls to each of us to go out to those who need to be assured, who need to be reminded that life is not an ordeal to be endured, but rather it's like a wedding feast to be enjoyed...celebrated. Out with gloom and in with joy, for "He came that we might have life, and have it abundantly!"

PRAYER Deepen, O God, the joy we feel because we belong to Christ. Fill us with your true spirit with the wine of the Gospel...His love, His trust, His way of reaching out to You. Forgive our foolish ways and reclothe us in a rightful mind, and send us forth to change life's water into wine for those whose lives we shall touch in the days ahead. In the name and spirit of the life bringer, even Jesus Christ, our Lord!

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