

## Epiphany II Year C

Lately I've been thinking a lot about water, the essential, rudimentary compound... two parts hydrogen, one part oxygen.... To experience the grand mystery of the universe, one may look no further than that simple molecule. I've thought about what water's like when it's hot... what it feels like when it is cold... about the marvel of ice. How playful water is in a mountain stream.... The drama of it in clouds... the power of it in oceans... the cool and gentle taste of it in the middle of the night... its aptitude for color... silver, green, blue, rose and gold and gray... black in a thunderstorm... the pure majesty, the mystery of it... and the danger as well... water is at once lethal and at once life giving.... In the quest to find life on other planets, it's water that scientists look for. There is no religion in the world that we know of that doesn't practice some form of water Ritual... Baptism being ours. We Christians didn't invent it. It's been around for thousands of years.... About mid-week, It crossed my mind that our very bodies are almost two thirds composed of water.... It showed up coincidentally in a cross-word puzzle this week... "water to Pierre," the clue... "eau" I scribbled.... I still remember some of my college French. There is no paradise without water.

Our story today in John's gospel is a story about water, and a story about the possibility of paradise in earth... this story only appears in John's Gospel. We don't know the source. We've already had one story about water in this gospel... the narrative of Jesus' baptism; and here just a few lines later another water story... Jesus' first sign we are told.... So having these stories so close together, the writer is tipping us off that they are connected... Jesus' baptism, and water changed to wine... the writers (I say

writers plural because most scholars agree that this Gospel was a collaborative process among a number of writers and editors)... the writers of this text consistently use the so-called miracle stories to make their theological points. And these writers are by no means giving us a literal history of Jesus's life and ministry. They are myth makers. They are looking deeply into the philosophical underpinnings of their age to make sense of this Jesus movement spreading like wildfire. The images in John are shining symbols, artistic, visionary propositions of what reality might be. They are gifts to our imaginations.

I am more and more convinced that John's Gospel gave universal validity to the Jesus movement... an irony, to be sure, because this Gospel almost didn't make it into the canon of scripture, because it was so very unlike the Synoptic Gospels; Gnostic to some; its claim of Jesus's divinity was a bridge too far for many. But without this imaginative Gospel with its metaphorical weight, the Jesus Movement, I think, would have remained a mere local cult, lost to history. John's Gospel put the Jesus phenomenon squarely within the philosophical discourse of the age among scholars and academics. The scribes of John gave the movement cosmopolitan significance and credibility.

Since time immemorial philosophers have tried to apprehend the mystery of the divine, and how the divine might be experienced in earth, in our very lives. Their consistent conclusion is that the life of the Spirit cannot be understood by reason, but that it is felt through our imaginative sensibilities. This Gospel has its theological roots in alchemy, that ancient philosophical practice of turning mundane earthly elements into gold. Some of these ancient mystics took the practice literally, while most treated the

alchemical ethos as symbolic of the mystery that the divine, God's very life, may be experienced in the everyday, in a place and in time. Plato thought as much, incorporating in his writings, Zoroastrian wisdom and Egyptian mysticism, both of which proclaim the presence of the divine shot through, not only in the natural world, but in human life and in the human imagination as well. Felt, not understood. Jesus is the principal symbol for these writers... the true human, bearing the divine life... and in our story today, another metaphor... water become wine. The rudimentary element of earth, become divine... This is fascinating to me, but enough... let's look at the text in John's Gospel:

First, the scene is a wedding feast, the ubiquitous allusion to, and a symbol for, God's coming reign, in both Hebrew scripture and the new testament literature... the consummation, as it were, of heaven and earth... so we're talking God's coming kingdom here... the image of fine wine, also, an image, not just of God's coming, but of God's lavish coming, the fruition of the kingdom, throughout Judean biblical literature.... Listen to how the prophet Isaiah puts it in the twenty-fifth chapter, some four hundred years earlier: "On this mountain the Lord of Hosts will make for all peoples (all peoples) a feast of rich food, a feast of well aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over the earth... the sheet that is spread over all the nations. He will swallow up death forever."

Here in our reading John is looking to the tradition for the time-honored metaphor for God's coming, a proven typology to make his point, and he uses several at once... wedding, feast, water, and wine...all images of heaven in earth, not promised in the

hereafter, but in earth, marked by lavish hospitality and celebration.... These are all images of transformation:... a wedding is the celebration of love and new life, a transformation of love in its maturing.... A consummation of the spiritual with the physical... a feast literally transforms our bodies with nourishment so that we are empowered for the way ahead; and hospitality: transformation from a solitary life into the joy of fellowship, of community... and wine, the soothing and ecstatic produce of mere grapes transformed... and John's not talking about the cheap stuff here... this ain't Greer's box wine... this is the real deal... rich and fine and abundant... and we must pay attention to another issue here in this story as well... We've been told what the coming kingdom looks like:.... It looks like a wedding feast with an unlimited supply of wine...but what of its timing... when, this kingdom? Jesus declares to his mother that his time has not yet come... and she waves him off in a moment... and we learn that indeed it is his time and the time is now. The coming change, the coming age is now... and we don't look to the heavens for its coming... but in the midst of artful sacrifice and hospitality... nothing magical about it... but the divine life present in something as mundane as a celebratory meal among friends... mundane like water... like wine. All of these images pertain to baptism. In baptism we recall that we have been transformed from a life of sin and death into the very resurrection life of Christ. This is not a ticket to heaven after death; this is about God's abundance here on this earth. And just to underscore the point... this marvelous transformation happens in community. In other words, there is no miracle without the community. I would argue that it is the community, the gathered guests that transform the water into wine, Jesus is merely the literary face of

the community. In our rite of Holy Eucharist, the congregation is the celebrant; the priest merely presides. It is the community, you, that makes the bread and wine into sacred nurture, the very life of Christ.

The time of paradise is now for us too, brother and sisters... we bear in our bodies the waters of baptism... in the earthen ware of our souls... we the bearers of God's ecstatic abundance... we are the sent ones just as Jesus is sent, the writers tell us. It is we who are to keep the feast going past the dark of night and well into the morning and in to the coming weeks, and throughout the ages... our life's work, this, the first sign... it is our time to change water into wine... and wine enough for all people and all nations, and particularly for those who have never tasted such extravagance.... Dear people of God... fill your hearts to the brim with the living water of baptism, the water of sacrifice, the water of loving neighbor... water become the wine of courage, water become the wine of justice, water become the wine of compassion and mercy... wine that heals and dignifies... we now the wine aged well and strained clear and offered in joy to all... destroying the shroud of death... swallowing it up... and bringing abundant life without end.

We, dear friends of God, all of us, are wine makers... caretakers and pourers of God's life in earth... and so there is great rejoicing... rejoicing for this water we bear become wine.... The feast doesn't end, but begins again and again, and will continue forever... and there is quite enough for all.... And it is so very good.... So good people, may the watery reality of our very bodies smack of Cana's wine.