

Epiphany 3

‘You will see greater things than these’, Jesus said to Nathanael in last Sunday’s Gospel: we’ve just heard how, on the third day after the call of the disciples, they begin.

The wedding at Cana completes the traditional three epiphanies or manifestations of Jesus which we contemplate following the celebration of his nativity at Christmas. On the Feast of the Epiphany a star reveals Jesus to the Gentiles; on the following Sunday, the Feast of his Baptism, a heavenly voice reveals him. Now he reveals himself.

In what John calls a ‘sign’ rather than a miracle Jesus replaces the water prescribed for Jewish purifications with wine so good that the head waiter wonders why the best has been kept until last. This wine represents the revelation and wisdom that Jesus brings from God

Proverbs 9.4-5:

⁴ "You that are simple, turn in here!" To those without sense she says, ⁵ "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.

Sirach 24.21[20]

²⁰ For the memory of me is sweeter than honey, and the possession of me sweeter than the honeycomb. ²¹ Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more.

This is also about fulfilling Old Testament prophecies of abundance of wine in the days of the Messiah: *Amos 9.13-14*

¹³ The time is surely coming, says the LORD, when the one who ploughs shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. ¹⁴ I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.

Through this sign, we’ve just been told by John, Jesus manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

Our other readings this morning - Melchizedek’s offering of bread and wine in Genesis 14, and Revelation’s blessing on ‘those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb’ - make connect this first sign with the enduring and efficacious sacramental sign in which we share this morning, the Eucharist.

But there’s also an intertwined motif involving the mother of Jesus. Mary’s request on behalf of the newly-married couple (‘they have no more wine’) is at first rebuffed by Jesus on the grounds that what he calls his ‘hour’ had not yet come. Yet the mother’s persistence, honouring Jesus’ terms (‘do whatever he tells you’), leads him to grant her original request (a pattern repeated in the

second Cana sign, the healing of a royal official's son, when the official's persistence wins assent to his request after an initial rebuff). Mary reappears at the foot of the cross (Jesus' 'hour'): her incorporation into discipleship is completed as she becomes the mother of the Beloved Disciple. From the earliest days of Christianity, Mary is seen as both a symbol of the Church and a New Eve.

John mentions the mother of Jesus after Cana only when she stands at the foot of the cross. This may help to explain Jesus' slightly odd-sounding address to his mother, 'woman', in our Gospel, adding that his 'hour' has not yet come. When she reappears at the cross it is Jesus' 'hour', the full and unexpected manifestation of his glory. In both her appearances in John, Mary is associated with Jesus' disciples. At Cana her action completes their call; at the foot of the cross she is made the mother of the Beloved Disciple ('woman, behold your son'), the model Christian, and given offspring to protect.

Understanding Mary as a symbol of the church helps us with the conversation at Cana. Mary's request leads to Jesus' performing a sign. But before he performs this sign, Jesus makes clear that his signs reflect his *Father's* sovereignty and not any human or family agency. If Mary is to have any role during his ministry it is only confirmed when 'the hour' of his glorification comes, the hour of passion, death, resurrection and ascension.

John thinks of Mary against the background of Genesis 3: she is the mother of the Messiah and her role is in the struggle against the satanic serpent; that struggle comes to its climax in Jesus' hour. Now she appears at the foot of the cross to be entrusted with offspring whom she must protect in the continuing struggle between Satan and the followers of the Messiah. Mary is the New Eve, the symbol of the Church; the Church has no role during the ministry of Jesus but only after the hour of his resurrection and ascension.

This is why Mary is rightly honoured in many Christian traditions as Mother of the Church and Help of Christians, and why her role in our salvation is rightly celebrated - never on her own, but always standing for all of us who come after, as the New Israel of God, his Church. Her watchword for us, from today's Gospel, is 'do whatever he tells you.'