

The Glorious Feast

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God's grace is a gift freely given. It is not something that we can demand, earn, or take for ourselves. It is given in God's good time which is, so often, not when we might wish it to arrive. But when it does come, it is given in such abundance that it is sufficient to make whole what has been broken, to feed thousands, and to restore life to the dead. Gifts, freely given out of an abundance of love, which reveal the glory of the giver.

DIVINE ABUNDANCE

The Old Testament is full of images of what the celebration will look like when all is set to rights and the chosen people of God are lifted to their rightful place of glory. All of the current and historical suffering of God's people will be redeemed in this glorious, eternal moment when the bride and bridegroom are joined for eternity.¹ The psalmist reminds us that God's love, faithfulness, righteousness, and justice are boundless. We are also reminded that these qualities manifest in abundance. God's presence and provision are always given in quantities greater than we need, even when our preparations are lacking entirely through our own fault.²

¹Isaiah 62:1-5

²Psalms 36:5-10

GRACE FREELY GIVEN

God's abundant gifts of love and life are given to us freely. They are not gifts that we have earned or that we could take for ourselves. They are entirely the result of God's good will and favour towards us. In John's gospel we see this more than once as Jesus hears a request for some kind of grace or help and refuses at first, on the basis that the time is not yet right. Then, presumably when the time is right, Jesus meets the need presented to him. We see this when Jesus refuses to go to Jerusalem during the Festival of Booths, as his disciples suggest;³ his refusal to go to Bethany immediately when summoned by Mary and Martha to attend their brother Lazarus;⁴ and again, with a much shorter interval, when his mother, Mary, asks him to help at the wedding at Cana which has run out of wine.⁵

In each case we are reminded that God's provision is more than enough, even if it does not come at the time we might think most appropriate. God's agency is not one that can be coerced or forced by human complaint or pressure. God's gifts, freely given, are also given entirely when and how God deems best. In the case of the wedding at Cana, God's provision is truly abundant. At a wedding where all of the other wine has already been drunk, Jesus provides another 120 gallons. Far more than is needed but no less than God chooses to pour out for the celebration at hand.

MIRACLE AND MYSTERY

There is an apocryphal story about this wedding which suggests that Mary, the mother of

³John 7:3-8

⁴John 11:1-44

⁵John 2:1-11

Jesus, is the aunt of the bridegroom. This neatly explains why she and Jesus are present at the wedding and why she would be concerned for the reputation of the wedding's host. To run out of wine reflects poorly on a host who did not—or could not—provide for his guests as expected. And, if that host is part of one's own family, the tarnish spreads quickly. (Whether this extra-biblical tradition is helpful or clutters the matter, I leave to you to decide.)

When describing the result of the miracle at Cana and that of the feeding of five thousand, John is, curiously, not interested in the production of food and wine. It happens, but is a secondary detail in his telling of these stories. Rather, John is deeply concerned with the abundance of what is provided by God and the effect that these events have on the people who witness and experience them. After the feeding of the multitude, John notes that "...when the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'"⁶ In experiencing God's abundant provision, the people begin to believe.

Similarly, at Cana, the changing of water into wine is only mentioned in passing. What is more important to John is that the disciples, having witnessed this work through which Jesus reveals his glory, come to believe in Jesus in a new, deeper way. Even in the working of a miracle such as this, Jesus's glory retains a mysterious quality that is not grasped by everyone equally. The servants at the wedding witnessed the same miracle as the disciples, but they are not counted among those who have come to believe. There is something about the relationship between Jesus and his disciples which helps them to understand better than the servants

what has truly happened here.

John's gospel does not include a telling of the Transfiguration story. In this recounting of events, Peter, James, and John do not have a mountain peak experience, witnessing Christ in glory blazing with Moses and Elijah at his side.⁷ Rather, John describes the revelation of Jesus's glory in a slow and steady way, shown piece by piece through all of his ministries and interactions. The overflowing grace of God is revealed to be pure gift given in relationship, rather than a single, overwhelming moment.

FIRST FRUITS OF NEW LIFE

This revelation of gracious glory culminates with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Even on the cross, as he dies, Jesus is about the work of God's new creation. He gives the beloved disciple and his mother, Mary, to one another as family. Neither will be bereft without Jesus. The language Jesus uses to do this harkens back to the wedding at Cana, referring to Mary as "Woman" rather than by her proper name or a more familiar term. "Woman", in the language of Jesus, is not the cold and distant term it would seem to English-speakers. It is a perfectly respectful term. On this occasion, rather than deny her request as being poorly-timed, Jesus is giving Mary and the beloved disciple instructions. God is creating, in them, a new family. Not unlike the expectations one might have at a wedding.

Weddings, like the one at Cana, held strong hopes and expectations of new beginnings. Here, in the marriage of bride and bridegroom, there is a new household, new family relationships, and the potential of new generations of

⁶John 6:1-14

⁷The Transfiguration is described in Matthew 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-13, and Luke 9:28-36.

children. At a wedding, God is doing a new thing and all are attentive to see it happen.⁸ It is no mistake that John places the wedding at Cana on the third day.⁹ The new beginnings of this wedding, including the first public miracle of Jesus, mirror the timing of the resurrection of Jesus on Easter. The prophet Hosea speaks of a repentant people being raised up on the third day, that they might live anew before their God and experience divine abundance like showers and spring rains that water the earth.¹⁰

Jesus, being raised from the dead, becomes the first fruits of a new creation.¹¹ His resurrection destroys death and undoes humanity's enslavement to sin. Jesus, being the second Adam and the first fruit of a new, redeemed, holy creation undoes the curse of sweat and toil in earth that produces little.¹² Jesus, as he slowly dies on the cross, plants seeds of the new creation in the lives of the two people closest to him, giving Mary, the woman, to the beloved disciple as mother and son.

Though those present to witness it do not yet understand, in Jesus's death we see signs of the promised wedding feast. When his side is pierced, water and blood both flow forth.¹³ We see the water of baptism, the body and blood of Christ which are the eucharistic feast, and we are returned to the overwhelming abundance of God's love.

⁸Isaiah 43:19

⁹Usually understood to mean the third day after Jesus's calling of Philip and Nathanael to be disciples.

¹⁰Hosea 6:1-3

¹¹1 Corinthians 15:20

¹²Genesis 3:19

¹³John 19:34

GOD'S GLORY MADE KNOWN

In the same way that the Christ Child in the manger sleeps in the shadow of the cross, at the crucifixion God fills the scene with signs of salvation to come. To come when the hour is right. As Jesus dies and all seems lost, we see signs of the wedding feast to be celebrated with exuberance and joy for the redemption God has worked for us. A new family is created, an abundance of water and wine pour forth,¹⁴ those who see come to believe¹⁵, and the horror of a shameful death turns all of humanity's fear and hatred into the greatest outpouring of God's beauty and glory we have yet known.

This is the wedding feast to which Christ invites each of us. Not because of the gifts we can offer, nor because we are more deserving than our neighbour, nor because we have somehow earned the invitation. We are invited because Christ desires a celebration and feast that includes us. Christ wants to see us transfigured into our perfect selves through him, and he is willing to pour out water, wine, and his entire life to make it so.

When you hear the invitation to the wedding feast, I pray you will come. It is glorious.

¹⁴An abundance of wine is a recurring image in the Old Testament related to the joy of redemption. See Amos 9:13-14; Hosea 4:7; Jeremiah 31:12; Enoch 10:19; 2 Baruch 29:5; Joel 3:18; Isaiah 25:6.

¹⁵Matthew 27:54; Mark 15:39