

# The Wedding at Cana



Here are two reflections on the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-12) one on the odd exchange between Mary and Jesus, and a second on the personal message of the story. These reflections are given in two versions; the second has more detail.

## \*Simple form\*

### The Exchange:

There was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and Jesus was there with his mother. As she worked with the women, sharing in their tasks of wedding hospitality, she noticed that the wine was running short. There followed an exchange with Jesus which is always explained in a most unsatisfactory manner. Mary implicitly asked Jesus for a miraculous intervention, and he apparently refused, telling her it was none of their business; nevertheless, as if he had agreed wholeheartedly, she presumed to tell the servants to do whatever he said and, indeed, the wine supply was generously refreshed.

### What really went on?

Mary's words to Jesus are simple: "They have no wine."

His response is somewhat mysterious. In a form of address not familiar to us, whether endearing or slightly formal for he was in a public place, Jesus says, "My lady, what is to me and to thee," obviously an idiomatic expression of some sort. And he continues that "My hour has not yet come."

In his very interesting and gentle *Life of Christ*, Guiseppe Ricciotti gives a literal translation of the Greek expression used here: "What is to me and to thee," and he points to the Hebrew idiom which lies behind it, and which is used elsewhere in the Bible, always meaning something like "What is going on between us?" Nevertheless, he still comes up needing to assume that much more passed between them before she cheerfully bid the servants to do whatever Jesus told them.

Yet I think the passage may be very simple. In his opening words, Jesus is asking Mary why she is hesitant about asking for his help. Rather than translating "What is to me and to thee" as "What is that to me and to thee," it makes sense to read, "My lady, what is our relationship?" Or, pushing past the idiom into our own idioms, "My lady, what is going on with you; what has come between us?"

Not that her hesitation is mysterious to him, however. She is afraid that his "hour" has come, that hour of his passion which is to follow so close upon his self-revealing ministry. In that hour, she apparently knows that she may not ask for ease but must accept the will of the Father in its deepest and most painful weight. They must sometimes have spoken of this ministry and this hour, so that they were associated in Mary's mind.

But the wedding of Cana is only a few months into the ministry of our Lord, and the hour of sorrow is years away; that "hour" has not yet come and the long and familiar relationship of trustful request and happy response is still open. Jesus reassures her of this, saying, "My hour has not yet come."

At once, she invites the servants to enter into that relationship of happy trust by doing whatever he tells them.

The amazing thing is that they do so. Whether out of trust for her, out of sheer desperation, or in

some mysterious act of personal faith, they act upon his request, filling the foot-washing jars (the biggest ones in the house) with plain water.

And they get lots of wine, well over 100 gallons!

## The Message

Like any Bible story, this is not just about Cana, but about all weddings, indeed, about all marriages. Sometimes, in any marriage, the wine runs short. What can we do? God has asked us not to back out of the marriage, and even natural law makes it clear that the lives of children and therefore of society are hopelessly tangled if we do. But the joy of marriage sometimes subsides to a degree that makes us as deeply embarrassed and distressed as this Jewish couple whose houseful of friends was about to be sent away disappointed from what they had expected would be the merriest celebration of the year.

What then?

Turn to Mary, and, under her gaze, do whatever Jesus asks, irrelevant and useless though it seem.

You'll see. The new wine will be better and will flow more freely than the wine you started with.

## \*Detail form\*

### What to me and to thee?

A little more background:

The expression that Jesus uses in speaking to Mary at Cana, variously translated “What has that to do with me” and “What concern is that to you and to me” is an idiomatic expression whose literal translation in Greek is, “What...to me and to thee.” To get the flavor of it, Giuseppe Ricciotti, in his *Life of Christ*, gives a list of some of the places where it is used in scripture. Here is part of the list:

1. Judges 11:12 ~ Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, “What is there between you and me, that you have come to me to fight against my hand?”
2. 2 Sam 16:10 ~ But the king said, “What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah?”
3. 2 Sam 19:22 But David said, “What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah, that you should today become an adversary to me? Shall anyone be put to death in Israel this day? For do I not know that I am this day king over Israel?”
4. 4 Kings 13:13
5. 4 Kings 9:18
6. 2 Chronicles 35:21 But Neco sent envoys to him saying, “What have I to do with you, king of Judah? I am not coming against you today, but against the house with which I am at war; and God has commanded me to hurry.”
7. Evidently there are many others, and in particular, in the gospels, all the passages where a demon says, “What have we to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth...” use this idiom.

Ricciotti, observes that in all these passages, especially the demon ones, the meaning of the idiom is, “why are you bothering me,” or an implied, “Leave me alone.” He goes on to suggest – as most do – that Jesus’ words to Mary are a bit of a put-off, but nevertheless she is not to be put off, and He responds

to her implicit request – and her explicit trust – with a miracle. Everyone follows this general interpretation, and nobody (that I know) is happy with it because Jesus seems a trifle insulting at the start, and Mary more than a trifle pushy in the middle, – so even though the story has a happy ending, it's not a satisfying one. It's a good story for Mary as intercessor, but not much good for Mary as model of submission to God's will and of being able to take "no" for an answer, which all of us need to do from time to time.

Look at the passage from Chronicles. In this one, you can see the meaning of "What's going on between us? There must be some misunderstanding." Since it is an idiom, it's fair to apply this. Alas, I am not a Hebrew or Greek scholar, so I can only try it out, glad to have some kind of useful information for an alternative interpretation.

Mary has been Jesus' constant companion for 30 years and she has never forgotten the visit of the Angel or the visit with Elizabeth or the prophecy of Simeon or the visit of the magi and the subsequent flight into Egypt. Surely she has talked over Jesus' mission with him, surely many times at least since his loss in the Temple at age 12.

And it may also be that there were miracles in Nazareth. I do not imagine daily miracles so that she didn't have to get out of bed and meet her responsibilities — that would be foolish and, in spirit, it would be opposed to the concept of the Incarnation — to live as we live. But at any rate, she did have reason to believe that he could handle the wine problem; that much is clear.

## His Hour

It's reasonable to think that they would have talked things over on whatever occasion or occasions lie behind her certainty about Jesus' power. One thing he did evidently did tell her was that when his real mission came, there would be a time — "my hour" — when she would not be able to ask anything. That day would come at the Crucifixion, when the passers-by jeered and said, "Why don't you get down?" But she, who loved him beyond all telling and would have wished him down beyond any of their silly insults, did not ask him to get down. She was silent; she just waited with John. She knew his hour had come, the hour of her silence, her waiting, her asking nothing.

But it was not "his hour" in Cana. So the wine ran out — who knows why, but weddings have their slips — and she wants to appeal to Jesus to fix it, but he has obviously begun his ministry. Is this "the hour" when she must not ask for anything?

She hesitates.

She doesn't say, "Jesus, please help them with the wine." She just says, "They have no wine."

Jesus looks up and sees her hesitation. She is emotionally backing off, uncertain of her place in this situation, now that his mission has begun. She has put the situation before him, but her request for help is unspoken; she is uncertain, and her face is clouded.

"Dearest woman," he says gently (in a usage which should be translated as words of respect, not a vague insult or distancing), "what has come between you and me?"

They have been apart for 2 months or so, perhaps for the first time in 30 years – the call of the first disciples, his baptism, and his desert retreat; that is no reason for her to be strained... Then he realizes the cause of her hesitation — realizes it humanly, because he is incarnate and doesn't have divine awareness of her needs at every moment. Of course everyone knows about his baptism; there was a theophany, and word has gone out during his month in the desert. Obviously his mission has begun, but what of that point when nothing can be asked — has that come?

No, mother, not yet. “My hour has not yet come.”

Everywhere in the New Testament, “my hour” refers to the hour of the passion. It’s not in Cana or Bethlehem, or Capharnaum, or Nazareth where they try to throw him over the cliff, or Samaria where he talks to a woman of ill repute; it’s Golgotha. And it’s not the wedding feast, which is his time of self-revelation. All the common interpretations of this passage, suggesting that this one time, “my hour” refers to his hour of manifestation, not his passion, only confuse the issue. “My hour” has only one meaning, and Cana is not his hour. Plain and simple.

### Do whatever he tells you

Mary is not confused; she is relieved of her hesitation and now she knows that she can say what comes naturally: “Do whatever he tells you.” And the servants do so and get 150 gallons of Original Wine from the First of all Winemakers.

It’s really good stuff!

Mary is our Mother who teaches us when to ask and when to suffer in silence; she is with us in both aspects of the Christian vocation, the trustful request and the silent suffering.

Whenever I pray for married couples who are suffering in their marriage, I say to Jesus and to Mary, “They have no wine.” It is my prayer for my children and for all married couples that the wine may never run short, as it need not since Jesus can make it out of water.

But sometimes it does, and I say to Jesus, “They have no wine,” and I know that he can fix it.

Pooh! Fix it! He can give better wine than ever. We start off our marriages with the wine of our own lives and our own making: our talents, our beauty, our strength, our savings, our dowry of study and skill. But when that wine runs out, there’s better wine.

Even so, sometimes we can’t ask for what we want because suffering is part of our vocation with Jesus, and even watching others suffer, which is still more painful. Mary understands both aspects of our vocation, and is ready to help us in both situations.