

## EPIPHANY 2, JAN. 20, 2019, Year C

- *Imagine that you were to sit down to write a fifth Gospel. How and where would you begin your Gospel?* As we heard at Christmas, Matthew and Luke begin theirs with Jesus' *birth and infancy*, though Mark and John do not. Yet, *after describing Jesus' Baptism, all four Gospels go on to describe how and where Jesus' public ministry begins.* The first three Gospels present Jesus as starting his ministry by *proclaiming* and *teaching*. John's Gospel describes the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in a surprisingly different way: *After calling his first disciples, Jesus accepts an invitation to a wedding!* Instead of taking center stage in the Gospel narrative, *Jesus becomes a guest at an event where others are at center stage.* This fits well with John's earlier words, in the Prologue to his Gospel, where he refers to Jesus' initial anonymity. John tells us that, *"He was in the world, and ... yet the world did not know him."*
- And notice how John describes the initial discovery of miraculously transformed wine: "When the steward tasted the water that had become wine," *he did not know where it came from.* And so, he called the *bridegroom*, to give *him –rather than Jesus– credit* for the good wine.
- In John's Gospel, *Jesus begins to reveal his vocation in a subtle and mysterious way ~ as a wedding guest* at Cana. An Epiphany revealing of his glory happens at a party ~ *and*, at a party where he is *not* the center of attention! And so, *the first event at which Jesus begins to disclose his messianic identity with a miracle, is in a small village* not far from his boyhood home. John's decision to begin his account of Jesus' public ministry in this way is remarkable. And artists through history have been grateful for the story.
- It is not hard to imagine *why Jesus' presence at a wedding has proved a popular subject in Christian art.* *Who can resist a party?* ~ Especially a wedding celebration, so full of hope! Think about artists in earlier times,

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often commissioned to do paintings of solemn subjects like Jesus' temptation, and his Crucifixion. *Surely*, the opportunity to paint the festive Cana wedding scene would have provided a welcome alternative.

- Most artists have presented this story *in a patterned way*. Whether in Orthodox icons or in western paintings, we usually see Jesus, his mother and disciples, sitting at a table *with the wedding party*. In so many of these works, both Jesus' conversation with his mother, and the filling and tasting of the water jars, *are depicted as happening at, or just next to, the same table*. *This obscures* how John describes the event, and his probable intent in doing so.
- Western religious art spans a transition from medieval Byzantine Icons, through Renaissance representational painting, to modern surrealism and abstractionism.<sup>1</sup> Medieval icons were produced *in and for prayer and worship*. *Despite, or because of*, those churchly origins, *European painters moved away from the stylized flatness of icons. And they turned toward more expressively representing the everyday lives of people around them*. Yet, early western artists like Giotto and Duccio retained a clearly spiritual focus in their work.
- *But with the Renaissance*, and the recovery of classical ideals of beauty and human representation, *paintings began to adhere to biblical narratives less-closely*. With time, *biblical stories became more like backdrops against which artists explored their own interests and concerns*. Eventually, for some, the Bible served merely as a source for recognizable images and themes. In relation to these themes and images, *artists felt increasingly free to explore the human form, as well as human emotions and psychology*.
- *So, in later history*, when approaching the Cana wedding story, artists portrayed it in significant ways that *diverged from John's Gospel. Instead of*

*focusing primarily on the stone jars and the transformation of the water, artists gave equal attention to the people at the gathering, where they were sitting, and the sumptuous 'goodies' on the table set before them.<sup>2</sup> In these paintings, the astonishing lavishness of what Jesus provides is diminished ~ especially when set side-by-side with what the wedding hosts provide. We miss seeing the heart of this story ~ that **through Jesus, the abundance of divine glory comes into a world colored by human scarcity.**<sup>3</sup> For he is the true 'host' even if, at first, his abundant gifts seem hidden. Peter Koenig's painting, which we viewed last week, captures all this beautifully. Today, I have provided you with another portion of it, which obviously depicts the *Cana theme*.*

- As we have previously noticed, Koenig's painting is profoundly **biblical while not being literal**. For, *he is faithful to John's highly symbolic, and mystical rather than literal approach*. And so, though we see the stone water jars mentioned by John, we see Jesus and his mother portrayed in a more contemporary setting, complete with a modern-looking table and wine glasses. **Once again, we need to 'read' the symbolic imagery to grasp the fuller significance of what both John's Gospel and Peter Koenig's painting offer to us.**
- The center of Koenig's overall painting portrays a vision of **the New Jerusalem, the city of God, coming down from heaven**. The image follows what we find described in the Book of Revelation.<sup>4</sup> This New Jerusalem becomes **God's dwelling place among God's people**. And at its center is **the enthroned Lamb, with his 'bride' the Church at his side**. From his side comes the water of life, pouring *into* the fallen but being redeemed world. **The cleansing and purifying water of life** fills the jars, as well as provides the context for Baptism. And as Peter Koenig mystically portrays, this water then becomes **the very good wine** which is served at the wedding feast.

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- Revelation also speaks of [the marriage supper of the Lamb](#), to which saints and martyrs are invited to join him in the heavenly realm.<sup>5</sup> Koenig portrays the company of these [holy ones standing before and around the throne, apparently bearing gifts](#). *If you look closely*, you will see that they are carrying the instruments of their martyrdom, while one of them leads what surely represents a colosseum lion. In several places in the painting, we see what Revelation refers to as [the tree of life](#) standing near them and near the gushing living water.<sup>6</sup> [For those who have died to the powers of \*this\* world are alive to those of the next.](#)
- Among so many paintings representing the Cana story, *this may be among the most faithful to what John wants us to see, and to believe.*<sup>7</sup> And [John's Cana story, like the whole of his Gospel, is about the wedding of the human and the divine, in Jesus.](#)<sup>8</sup>
- Many guests at the Cana wedding *surely noticed the sudden arrival of a huge batch of very fine wine*—but [not where](#) it came from, *nor what* it represented. Those at the table were likely focused on the bridal couple, while enjoying all the splendid things on offer. But those who stood nearby, at the edges of the scene, were in a position to notice something else. [Of greatest significance at this event was not the hospitality provided by the wedding hosts, whose wine in fact ran out!](#) Most significant was [the more abundant and mystical hospitality provided by a higher source](#). Through an unheralded guest, God becomes the host. *And in John's mystical story, God's hospitality embraces our needy human nature.* God shows us how the deficiency we all share is blessed, and then filled. [The empty vessels of our souls are 'filled to the brim' with the living water of the Holy Spirit.](#)<sup>9</sup>



Peter Koenig, *Christmas–Epiphany*





Peter Koenig, Christmas–Epiphany (*detail from central panel*)

**John 2:1-11**

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. [Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.](#) When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? [My hour has not yet come.](#)" His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. [When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from](#) (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), [the steward called the bridegroom](#) and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his [signs](#), in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Some paintings by Salvador Dali provide a perhaps unexpected example of surrealist religious painting.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most dramatic example of this is the 1563 painting, titled *The Wedding at Cana*, by Paolo Veronese. High quality reproductions of this can be found easily through an internet search, and in Wikipedia. Veronese's painting is so populated with elaborately depicted wedding guests and extraordinary architectural elements that it is not immediately evident who and where Jesus is, in the painting!

<sup>3</sup> For this point, see John Shea, *The Relentless Widow, Year C*, in his *Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2006), p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> See Revelation 21 and 22, which mentions many of the details we see in Koenig's painting, including the 12 gates, and the pure river of water of life

<sup>5</sup> See Revelation 19.

<sup>6</sup> See Revelation 22:2.

<sup>7</sup> (A statement I have made previously in relation to Niels Larsen Stevns' painting, *The Wedding at Cana*.) It matters little to my point whether or not the author of Revelation is the same John as the author of the Fourth Gospel.

<sup>8</sup> See John Shea, *ibid*. This theme is also strongly present in our reading from Isaiah 62:1-5, regarding the 'marriage' between God and Israel.

<sup>9</sup> See John 7:37-39, in context, which appears to build upon the Cana imagery.