

The First Sign of Mercy: Cana (Jn 2:1-11)

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning! Before beginning the catechesis, I should like to greet a group of couples who are celebrating their 50th wedding anniversaries. They really are the “good wine” of the family! Yours is a witness that newlyweds — whom I will greet afterwards — and young people must learn from. It is a beautiful testimony. Thank you for your witness.

After having commented on several parables about mercy, today we shall ponder on Jesus’ first miracle, which John the Evangelist calls “signs”, because Jesus doesn’t perform them in order to excite wonder but to reveal the love of the Father. The first of these miraculous signs is actually recounted by John (2:1-11) and takes place at Cana in Galilee. It is a kind of “gateway”, on which are engraved the words and expressions that illuminate the entire mystery of Christ and open the hearts of the disciples to the faith. Let us look at a few of them.

In the introduction we find the expression “*Jesus with his disciples*” (v. 2). Those whom Jesus called had to follow him, he bound to himself in a community and now, like a single family, they are all invited to a wedding. Thereby initiating his public ministry at the wedding at Cana, Jesus reveals himself as the spouse of the People of God, proclaimed by the prophets, and reveals to us the depth of the relationship that unites us to Him: it is the new Covenant of love. What is at the foundation of our faith? An act of mercy by which Jesus binds us to him. And the Christian life is the response to this love, it is like the history of two people in love. God and man meet, seek, find, celebrate and love one another: just like the lovers in the Song of Songs. Everything else comes as a result of this relationship. The Church is the family of Jesus into which he pours his love; it is this love that the Church safeguards and desires to give to all.

In the context of the Covenant, we are also to understand Our Lady’s observation: “*They have no wine*” (v. 3). How can one celebrate a wedding feast and make merry without what the prophets indicated as a typical element of the messianic banquet (cf. Am 9:13-14; Jl 2:24; Is 25:6)? Water is necessary for life, but wine expresses the abundance of a banquet and the joy of a feast. This wedding feast was short of wine; the newlyweds are ashamed of this. But just imagine ending a wedding feast drinking tea; it would be a shame. Wine is necessary for a feast. By transforming into wine the water of the jars used “for the Jewish rites of purification” (Jn 2:6), Jesus performs an eloquent sign: he transforms the Law of Moses into the Gospel, bearer of joy. As John states elsewhere: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17).

The words Mary addresses to the servants come to crown the wedding of Cana: “*Do whatever he tells you*” (v. 5). It is curious: these are her last words recounted by the Gospels: they are the legacy that she hands down to us. Today too Our Lady says to us all: “Whatever he tells you — Jesus tells you, do it”. It is the legacy that she has left us: it is beautiful! It is an expression that recalls the formula of faith used by the people of Israel at Sinai in response to the promises of the Covenant: “All that the Lord has spoken we will do!” (Ex 19:8). And indeed at Cana the servants obey. “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 steward of the feast’. So they took it” (Jn 2:7-8). At this wedding, the New Covenant is truly articulated and to the servants of the Lord, that is to all the Church, is entrusted a new mission: “Do whatever he tells you!”. To serve the Lord means to listen and to put into practice his Word. It is the simple but essential recommendation of the Mother of Jesus and it is the program of life of the Christian. For each one of us, to draw from the jar is equivalent to entrusting oneself to the Word of God in order to experience its effectiveness in life. Thus, together with the steward of the banquet who had tasted the water-become-wine, we too can exclaim: “you have kept the good wine until now” (v. 10). Yes, the Lord continues to reserve the best wine for our salvation, just as it continues to flow from the pierced side of the Lord. The conclusion of the narrative sounds like a judgment: “This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (v. 11). The wedding feast at Cana is more than a simple account of Jesus’ first miracle. Like a treasure chest, He guards the secret of his Person and the purpose of his coming: the awaited Groom starts off the wedding that is fulfilled in the Paschal Mystery. At this wedding Jesus binds his disciples to himself in a new and final Covenant. At Cana Jesus’ disciples become his family and at Cana the faith of the Church is born. We are all invited to the wedding feast, because the new wine will never run short!

Humble Prayer Obtains Mercy (cf Lk 18:9-14)

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning! Last Wednesday we listened to the parable of the judge and the widow, on the need to pray with perseverance. Today, with another parable, Jesus wants to show us the right attitude for prayer and for invoking the mercy of the Father; how one must pray; the right attitude for prayer. It is the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (cf. Lk 18:9-14). Both men went up into the Temple to pray, but they do so in very different ways, obtaining opposite results.

The Pharisee stood and prayed using many words. His is yes, a prayer of thanksgiving to God, but it is really just a display of his own merits, with a sense of superiority over “other men”, whom he describes as “extortionist, unjust, adulterers, or even,” for example, referring to the other one there, “like this tax collector” (v. 11). But this is the real problem: that Pharisee prays to God, but in truth he is just self-laudatory. He is praying to himself! Instead of having the Lord before his eyes, he has a mirror. Although he is standing in the Temple, he doesn’t feel the need to prostrate himself before the majesty of God; he remains standing, he feels secure, as if he were the master of the Temple! He lists all the good works he has done: he is beyond reproach, observing the Law beyond measure, he fasts “twice a week” and pays “tithes” on all he possesses. In short, rather than prayer, he is satisfied with his observance of the precepts. Yet, his attitude and his words are far from the way of God’s words and actions, the God who loves all men and does not despise sinners. On the contrary, this Pharisee despises sinners, even by indicating the other one there. In short, the Pharisee, who holds himself to be just, neglects the most important commandment: love of God and of neighbor.

It is not enough, therefore, to ask *how much* we pray, we have to ask ourselves *how* we pray, or better, in *what state our heart is*: it is important to examine it so as to evaluate our thoughts, our feelings, and root out arrogance and hypocrisy. But, I ask myself: can one pray with arrogance? No. Can one pray with hypocrisy? No. We must only pray by placing ourselves before God just as we are. Not like the Pharisee who prays with arrogance and hypocrisy. We are all taken up by the frenetic pace of daily life, often at the mercy of feelings, dazed and confused. It is necessary to learn how to rediscover the path to our heart, to recover the value of intimacy and silence, because the God who encounters us and speaks to us is there. Only by beginning there can we in our turn encounter others and speak with them. The Pharisee walked toward the Temple, sure of himself, but he was unaware of the fact that his heart had lost the way.

Instead the tax collector — the other man — presents himself in the Temple with a humble and repentant spirit: “standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast” (v. 13). His prayer was very brief, not long like that of the Pharisee: “God, be merciful to me a sinner”. Nothing more. A beautiful prayer! Indeed, tax collectors — then called “publicans” — were considered impure, subject to foreign rulers; they were disliked by the people and socially associated with “sinners”. The parable teaches us that a man is just or sinful not because of his social class, but because of his way of relating to God and how he relates to his brothers and sisters. Gestures of repentance and the few and brief words of the tax collector bear witness to his awareness of his own miserable condition. His prayer is essential. He acts out of humility, certain only that he is a sinner in need of mercy. If the Pharisee asked for nothing because he already had everything, the tax collector can only beg for the mercy of God. And this is beautiful: to beg for the mercy of God! Presenting himself with “empty hands”, with a bare heart and acknowledging himself to be a sinner, the tax collector shows us all the condition that is necessary in order to receive the Lord’s forgiveness. In the end, he is the one, so despised, who becomes an icon of the true believer. Jesus concludes the parable with the judgment: “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted” (v. 14). Of these two, who is the corrupt one? The Pharisee. The Pharisee is the very icon of a corrupt person who pretends to pray, but only manages to strut in front of a mirror. He is corrupt and he is pretending to pray. Thus, in life whoever believes himself to be just and criticises others and despises them, is corrupt and a hypocrite. Pride compromises every good deed, empties prayer, creates distance from God and from others.

If God prefers humility it is not to dishearten us: rather, humility is the necessary condition to be raised by Him, so as to experience the mercy that comes to fill our emptiness. If the prayer of the proud does not reach God’s heart, the humility of the poor opens it wide. God has a weakness for the humble ones. Before a humble heart, God opens his heart entirely. It is this humility that the Virgin Mary expresses in the Cantic of the *Magnificat*: “he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden [...] his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation” (Lk 1:48, 50). Let her help us, our Mother, to pray with a humble heart. And we, let us repeat that beautiful prayer three times: “Oh God, be merciful to me a sinner”.