

“Keeping The Party Going”

John 2:1-11

January 20, 2013

Back in the 1970's Anthony Burgess, who wrote the screenplay for Stanley Kubrick's iconic film "A Clockwork Orange," was given the task of writing the screenplay for the made for television mini-series "Jesus of Nazareth." When it was learned that Burgess was writing the screenplay, he became the target of numerous individuals from Vatican officials, to skeptics, to critics of religion and people of deep religious faith. There were endless numbers who wanted to influence how Burgess would tell the story of Jesus. Burgess would have none of it and instead locked himself away with just the four gospels and his own heart and conscience as inspiration. After completing the screenplay for "Jesus of Nazareth," Burgess was moved to write a novel about Jesus a book some of you may have heard of or read that is called "Man of Nazareth."

In the novel man of Nazareth, Burgess tells his own version of what happened at the "Wedding Feast In Cana" when Jesus performs his first miracle of turning water into wine. Using his writer's license, Burgess describes the feast as actually being for Jesus' own wedding and goes into detail about the whole event. He offers a sort of explanation of how the water turned to wine. What happens in his novel is that when the water in the stone jars is brought forward to be tasted, everyone is informed that that in order for anyone to taste the wine, then the one who drinks it must be pure of heart and without sin. For the ones who were sinners, the liquid would taste like water.

Well as you can imagine, not wanting to be known as a sinner to those around them, one by one, as each person took their cup and tasted. They all proclaimed that it was indeed the best wine they had ever had. That is except for one younger man who tasted it and said that it was water, everyone pointed the finger at him and said that he must be a sinful type. And the rest continued to drink and the party went on.

The story Burgess tells offers an interesting twist and is certainly entertaining to read in its entirety. It is not unlike many modern and not so modern takes concerning the miracles of Jesus, in that sometimes we find within us a need to explain away the miracles. We all want to

have some sort of natural or rational account for everything these days. In fact most critics of religion will tell you that you must take all possible or plausible explanations into account and if you do so you will always come to the conclusion that there are no miracles. If there is a possible explanation...whether you know it to be the actual reason or not...this will discount or even eliminate the excuse a miracle. It gets to the point where some say that believing in miracles is nothing but foolishness.

There is this time-honored story about a skeptic who was continually harassing the local church minister. His one delight in life seemed to be making the minister appear intellectually inadequate. (Which isn't that hard to do by the way!) The minister bore these challenges to his theology and faith with great restraint, but there were times when all the minister really wanted to do was lay right into the guy.

One day the skeptic was heckling the minister about his views on miracles. "Give me one concrete example of a miracle," the skeptic taunted. "One concrete example." Whereupon the minister, who had reached his limit, hauled off and kicked the skeptic furiously on the shin.

The skeptic couldn't believe it!

The minister asked, "Did you feel that?"

"Yes," the man said as he favoured his shin, rubbing it furiously.

"Well if you had not felt that," said the minister, "it would have been a miracle!"

I know that for many if they do not see, or feel or somehow experience the miracle for themselves, then there can be no miracle. But as one author puts it, "If we cast into our own little lakes, it is not surprising if we do not obtain an accurate sampling of experience. However, a worldwide cast will reveal many reports of unusual occurrences. It only takes a single justified example to show that there is more to reality than a physical world." In other words, there are experiences and instances in life that we can't always explain away. An energy beyond our own that might have something else to teach or tells us about the dimensions in which we live.

Yet some choose balk at this possibility. I believe a part of this has to do with our discomfort of mystery. Being able to explain away the things that happen in our lives gives us a level of control. I think that most of us have been raised to believe and rightfully so, that with knowledge comes power. The problem is though is that we have also come to believe that the

opposite is true. (The opposite being that not having knowledge is a form of weakness.) We may feel as if we need an answer for everything. But is that really true? Omniscience or all-knowingness has always been considered a divine attribute. God or the gods were the all-knowing ones. And even though we may live in an information age, where we can Google an answer in a moment, none of us can know all the answers. We still suffer from the same weaknesses and inadequacies.

Why must our shortcomings bother us so? There are others who will always possess strengths and abilities that we may lack.

I managed to watch some of the Canadian Figure skating championships this week. I watch these figure skaters jump through the air doing triple toe loops, when I'm just happy to not trip when I walk...to me what they can do really is nothing short of a miracle. It shows their heightened ability and skill. And sure I may be able to explain part of why they are such good skaters, be it their dedication and talent, their parent's ability to finance their lessons and coaching, their physical abilities and so-on but is not what they do still a wonder? Sometimes miracles are just plain miracles. We don't need to explain other than to say that they help us identify special people or special situations. Or an ordinary situation that somehow becomes special.

As we think about the wedding feast in Cana as it is described in John's gospel. I think we would all agree that getting married is a special situation. Getting married was as big a deal (is not bigger) in first century Judea as it is for many today. A wedding was something that involved the whole community. Thus it should be no surprise as we read this text that Jesus was there with disciples he had only met a couple days earlier. The wedding feast would have been one big party. It would have spilled out of the household of the host and into the streets of the tiny village. It would have lasted for days.

The wedding would have been something that the father of the bride should have prepared for since the day his daughter was born. Every responsible father in those days would have put away some wine on his daughter's birthday every year so that when it came time for her to be married, there would be plenty of wine to drink. Some of it beautifully aged. It would have been a great source of joy for the Father to share this wine with the guests.

But, perhaps the father of the bride wasn't that responsible. Maybe he drank the wine over the years for his own enjoyment, maybe he sold some of it...who knows? What we do know is that the wine runs out. Now you have to understand, this would have been a great social embarrassment for the father. It would have been a source of shame if it was found out that the Father of the bride could not provide. If everyone were to have found out, for years later all people would be able to say is, "Oh yeah, I remember that wedding, that was the time they ran out of wine...what drag that was." Not the way one wants to begin life with their newly betrothed.

That's why if you look closely, everything here is treated kind of hush hush. Whenever Jesus performs his miracles, even though they are truly wonders, there is something quiet and restrained about them. It's not like the retelling of the story that Anthony Burgess gave in "The Man of Nazareth" where everyone knew the wine ran out and then the announcement was made that the pure in heart would know it was wine. In this case Jesus' mother comes to him and she says, "Jesus, do something they have run out of wine." And to paraphrase Jesus says something like, "let me handle this my own way!" Well, Jesus' mother knows her son best and knows he will do something and informs the servants present that they should do whatever Jesus tells them. She gets out of the way!

So Jesus tells them to take the stone water jars that were used to hold the water for ritual bathing. Being ritually clean back then was important it meant that you were socially acceptable...people could be in contact with you -You were okay to hang around with. Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars with water and then tells the servants to bring the water to the chief steward who tastes not only wine that is drawn from the jar, but the finest wine he could have ever imagined. Not only has Jesus saved the family from social embarrassment, but he does it by providing the best wine.

Jesus did this, the first of his signs in Cana of Galilee. The Messiah performs this miracle not in the Temple in the city of Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish faith. Jesus does this in a Galilliean backwater, in an unassuming place, in an unassuming way. Chances are the father and the bride never even knew this miracle happened. The miracle, although it saved them

from the shame of a socially awkward and embarrassing situation, was unbeknownst to them. With the help of the servants Jesus saves the party.

Is it a miracle? I accept it as a matter of faith and befitting of Jesus' character that Jesus, who would not turn stones into bread for His own benefit, could turn water into wine to help a local family save face. Why not accept the miracle? Every spring, in vineyards all over the world water gets drawn up from the ground and transforms it into the pungent juice of the grape. C.S. Lewis argued that the God who through the natural order can turn water, soil, and sunshine plus grapes into juice which, under proper conditions, can become wine, could, through Christ, shorten the process.

Believing in miracles is a part of what it means to have faith. The miracles, signs and wonders of Christ are the ones that call us to believe in life and not forsake it. The miracles of Jesus reveal the possibility that there is a power that can save us from our embarrassments, our shame, our shortcomings, our poor planning or whatever else in order for you and I to have a future together. In order that our relationships be redeemed and in order that we might be redeemed. Sometimes these miracles happen without us even knowing it. What you don't know won't hurt you, in fact it might even be helping you! These miracles, and signs and wonders of life are the things that keep the party going. They lead to abundant life. They are the beautiful, excellent things that carry us through life with a sense of expectation and hope that there is something more to behold, to witness, to come.

The most ancient tradition says that the author of the Gospel of John was the first of the four gospels written. Recorded by one of the disciples near the end of his life as he reflected upon the wondrous things that he had witnessed, and trying to put them all into perspective. Then he affirms his faith by saying that Jesus is not only "the life of the party" at a wedding back there somewhere in the Galilee, He is also the Life of all life, the One who continually brings meaning and hope and joy to millions who believe in Him throughout all of the ages. Even Anthony Burgess admitted, after he finished writing the screenplay for "Jesus of Nazareth" that "The more I worked on my scripts, the more convinced I became that this man [Jesus] probably had divinity in him."

When one reads through John's gospel and if you look closely at the miracles of Jesus, he never does them for his own sake. They are always done for the sake of others, done to glorify God, because Christ knows that is what life eternal is made of. It is made of wonders, done for others, wonders that tell us something about the heart of God and what it is that God wants for us and those around us.

Could it be that God just wants the party to continue?

This was the case in Cana of Galilee all those years ago.