

Wedding Feast at Cana, 29 January 2023

1 Kings 17.8-16; Ps 36.5-10; 1 Corinthians 18-31; John 2.1-11

The story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath circa 850 BCE and the wedding at Cana in Galilee circa 33 CE tell of two very different incidents. The first centres on water, cake (meal) and oil and the second on wine. In both for very different reasons there is a lack of food to sustain life in the first and a lack of wine to gladden the human heart in the second. One cannot but be reminded of Psalm 104,

Bless the Lord, O my soul.

O Lord my God, you are very great.

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to use,
to bring forth food from the earth,
and wine to gladden the human heart,
oil to make the face shine,
and bread to strengthen the human heart. (Verses 1, 14-15)

In the first episode due to a famine that has taken hold of the land Elijah is first told to go to the Wadi Cherith, where he will drink of the water of the wadi and be fed by ravens. Once the waters of the wadi fail Elijah is told to move on and to seek out a widow, the widow of Zarephath, as she is known. The outcome of the widow's and the prophet's exchange (which foreshadows Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well) is that both are wondrously provided for as the author of the First Book of Kings records,

'For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.'

The circumstances surrounding the Wedding at Cana are other and yet those who drew up the three year lectionary (an innovation of the 20th century) thought to pair the Wedding at Cana with the Widow of Zarephath. What were they thinking? I want

to explore this with you a little. I don't know the answer. It will be hidden away in some archive or other. But I can tell you this. From the earliest days of the fledgling church those who believed Jesus to be the Messiah searched the Hebrew Scriptures not only for prophecies that Jesus fulfilled, but also for stories that foreshadowed Jesus's ministry like 'The widow of Zarephath'. The technical term for this pairing is typology. Additionally the earliest believers who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah sought clues in the Temple liturgy as is well documented in the Letter to the Hebrews. In the Acts of the Apostles we learn that Temple priests became Christians. There we read, 'The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.' (Acts 6.7)

A basic definition for typology is a person or event that prefigures Christ or the Christian people of God and helps the Christian to a deeper understanding of who Christ is and who we the people of God are. Here we might think of King David. An event for the Christian people of God to better understand themselves is the Exodus (the departure of the Hebrew people from Pharaonic Egypt) as we journey under the kingship of Christ as exiles or pilgrims to our promised land. If you want to take this further, Robert's 'Soundings' talks on typology can be found on our webpage. And all of us should consider learning about the Verdun Altar housed in the monastery of Klosterneuburg. The Verdun Altar is not only a fine piece of art, but is also a high expression of typology. Sadly, the Verdun Altar cannot be fully appreciated by the visitor to Klosterneuburg, because the cameos are one numerous, two smallish and three the time too short. Furthermore it requires a good knowledge of the Bible. The Verdun Altar would have been used for teaching purposes and once having learnt the theological matrix it would have served as an aid to contemplating God's work of salvation and how this is worked out in time. The chronological order captured in the Verdun altar is 1. Before the giving of the Law of Moses, 2. After the giving of the Law of Moses 3. Now under God's mercy, the time of grace. Indeed those who read the Scriptures regularly should be aware of typology for a deeper appreciation of what

they are reading and the skill of the authors of the New Testament, as they forged a typology based understanding of Christ.

Let us now with that technical interlude consider why the episodes of the Widow of Zarephath and the Wedding of Cana are paired. The fundamental point is that both speak of God's provision first for Elijah and the widow and her son and then for all those attending the wedding at Cana.

It is expressed differently in the episode of the Widow of Zarephath and Elijah. There God speaks a promise, 'The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth'. In the account of the Wedding at Cana it is inferred. Jesus using the six stone jars of purification each holding twenty or thirty gallons of water turns it into wine of the highest quality leaving the steward of the feast, today's wedding organiser, to exclaim, '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.'

God's provision will not fail. God's provision is abundant. The time of famine will be succeeded by a time of abundance. In a time of famine God will provide, if we are willing to share sacrificially as the widow does. The widow we are told has been commanded (in another translation charged) by God to provide for Elijah. How to understand commanded here is not easy, especially with our 21st century aversion to be under anyone's command or charge except our own and so it must grate. In the widow's case she has placed herself under God's authority and having placed herself under God's authority (her submission) she is open to direction. She is open to being a vessel of God's provision for Elijah, which becomes for her a blessing. And in this the widow can be likened to Mary who says 'Be it unto me according to thy word.' Mary gives her consent. The widow in contrast to Mary does not give her consent by a word spoken but rather by the provision given, by her actions.

The widow like Elijah indeed like Mary has placed herself under God's 'commanded', God's direction and in this sense so are we. We are under God's direction. God's 'commanded'. We have a will, no question. And we can be wilful, meaning obstinate. Commanded here I suggest is best appreciated in the sense that God who proves him/herself to be faithful is to be trusted. Only when we learn evermore to trust God will we want to place ourselves under God in the way that both the widow and Mary do. Elijah, the widow, Mary, these three trusted God. Is it too simple to say in the end 'till all our strivings cease', 'God knows best'? Must we have to rage against God all our lives? And if rage is too strong, must we be endlessly doubting God? His provision for us. His direction. Must we close our ears to the 'commanded' of God?

Be alert in a time of spiritual famine to God's directions as Elijah is, by which he is saved. In a time of spiritual famine be alert to the direction of God. In the new dispensation that is under Jesus Christ God's provision is abundant and it is given to gladden the heart, to make the face shine and to strengthen the heart. One of the themes of the Bible in general is joy, the joy of knowing God. Joy is also a theme of the Epiphany season. Recall what Matthew writes about the Magi reaching their destination, 'When they [the Magi] saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.' There was joy when God held his hand over Elijah, the widow and her son in a time of famine. There was joy at the wedding at Cana, when water was turned into wine. God's provision is one of abundance as we are reminded today in the wedding at Cana in Galilee, but more often in the people he gives us and the people he sends us. Let us know ourselves under God's 'commanded' and held within the joy of knowing God made manifest in Jesus Christ.