**Homily by Archbishop Brendan M. O’Brien**

**St. Mary’s Cathedral**

**Sunday, January 20, 2019**

As you have probably noticed at Sunday Mass, there is usually some connection between a theme or pattern in the Old Testament reading and that of the Gospel.  This helps us to grasp the main message or thrust of both these readings.  For example, in today’s account of the wedding feast at Cana, we have a story about an embarrassed bridegroom who is running out of wine, the sensitivity of Mary, the mother of Jesus, to this situation, and how Jesus remedies the problem.  But there is more here than that.

St. John’s Gospel, from which this passage is taken, uses a lot of symbolism.  St. John does not speak of the changing of water into wine as a miracle or marvelous event, but calls it  one of the “signs” that Jesus performed.  Now, a sign works on at least two levels: there is the surface/physical or literal level – what we see, hear, touch – and then there is another level, which we might call the depth level, or the symbolic or spiritual level, that  reveals a deeper meaning.

The pairing of this Gospel passage with the passage from Isaiah 62 helps us to see the deeper meaning of this sign of water turned into wine.  The first reading speaks of the return of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem.  It is a homecoming after years of suffering and exile; what was “forsaken” and “desolate” now becomes the Lord’s delight.  God looks upon Israel as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride.  This passage portrays God as close and committed to his people, not as a distant or aloof God.  The relationship between God and his people is described in warm and tender terms; Israel is given new names of endearment.

So, when we look for the deeper meaning of the wedding feast of Cana, we can see it as a revelation of who Jesus is – that is, God drawing near to his people in the person of Jesus, the Son of God –  and what it wants to tell us is that a new relationship between God and humans  is being ushered in.  We see this represented in the six stone water jars.  They were used for the Jewish rites of purification.  The water is used to ritually wash the body, the outside, to make it clean, to make one worthy to stand in God’s presence.  There are 6 jars, which is one shy of perfection – for 7 is the symbol of fullness or perfection:  seven days in a week, seven choirs of angels.  The changing of the water into wine means that the time has come for the purifying water that cleans from without to be transformed into something that will enliven the person from within.  At Jesus’s instruction, the jars are filled to the brim with water, which fills the inside of the jars to the maximum.  The water turned into litres and litres of wine is the beginning of the abundance of grace that wells up from within – the imparting of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus will give to his followers who believe in him.

In St. John’s Gospel, the earthly ministry of Jesus takes place between two meals: the wedding feast of Cana at the beginning of his ministry, and the Last Supper at the end, where Jesus promises the gift of the Holy Spirit, who will be sent to guide and inspire each baptized person, as well as the whole community of believers.

When Mary says to Jesus, “They have no wine”, we see that Jesus addresses her as “Woman”, which sounds rather curt.  However, that is the word given to Eve in the Book of Genesis – Eve, the mother of all the living.  To address Mary in this way is to indicate that she is being looked at not only as the mother of Jesus, but of all believers.  This same address will be given to her at the foot of the cross, when Jesus says to her, in reference to the beloved disciple, “Woman here is your son”, and, to the disciple, “Here is your mother”.

So, when Mary says, “There is no wine”, this can go beyond the actual lack of wine at the wedding feast to include all the things that we humans stand in need of, especially our lack of faith, our lack of joy.  St. John sees Jesus as the one who fills those needs by giving us his Spirit in abundance, the Spirit symbolized by the water turned into wine.

There is even a tie in with the second reading from St. Paul to the Corinthians, where St. Paul speaks of the variety of gifts but the same Spirit.  The central gift of the Holy Spirit is the grace to affirm that Jesus is Lord.  This is what binds a parish community together, despite our differences; this is what binds a diocese together, and also the universal Church.  This is what binds all Christian churches together in a unity that is greater than our differences.  This week, as we celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we recognize this.

Today, despite the sinfulness of the Church’s members, St. Paul is telling us, as he did the Corinthians, that the Church is also a Spirit-filled people.  When we read his Letters, we see that there were many problems and questions in Corinth, but there was also the conviction that the Spirit was present, and that the members of the community were being called to use whatever gifts or manifestations of the Spirit that they had been given to build up the community to the greater fullness of life that God, in Jesus, wants us to enjoy and share with him.