

JOHN 2 – WATER-INTO-WINE TRICK ENDS EMBARRASSMENT

Jesus' trick of turning water into wine has to be one of the best known incidents in his career. Regrettably, it is alone of the most poorly handled.

Usually the story is turned into little more than a bald demonstration of his presumed deity. At the same time its delightful way of handling an acutely embarrassing *faux pas* is all but ignored.

The account is found only once in the Christian scriptures, at John 2:1-11. Sometime near the beginning of his public exposure Jesus was invited to a wedding in the hamlet of Cana.

Also on the guest list were his mother and his handful of followers. They must have been having a good time, for in those days marriage celebration could last for a week or longer.

Then the unthinkable happened. They ran out of refreshment. All the wine had been drunk up. According to ancient custom, wedding feasts were hosted by the family of the groom, not by the bride's parents.

So it's not hard to imagine the acute embarrassment felt by that new husband. He must have been abashed. He had just taken a wife and couldn't even fulfill the customary obligations for their first party!

At that point the author's attention turns to Jesus. In fact, the very sparseness of his narrative is remarkable. We never learn the identity of the groom. The bride is not even mentioned.

Jesus' mother (who, by the way, is never named in John's Gospel; we know her here as Mary only from other accounts) informs him of the groom's predicament. And after receiving an almost curt reply, she instructs the servants to "do whatever he tells you."

So the visiting rabbi takes over. He has the waiters fill half a dozen 25-gallon water jugs. Then when they dip the contents out they find themselves pouring wine!

Then it is the toastmaster's turn to act nonplussed. "Most people serve their best beverages before the guests have had too much to drink," he remarks, "but you've kept the vintage wine for last."

Back off from the story for a minute, and ask why the author bothered to tell it. He obviously didn't intend to comment on the

institution of marriage in general or wedding receptions in particular.

Neither was he interested in sermonizing on the merits or demerits of drinking alcoholic beverages. The author's purpose is suggested by his closing comment about how Jesus' followers trust him because he had uncovered his glory.

But what was it that made Jesus shine? Not just his magic act. Historians tell us there were more than a few sorcerers and magicians who could have pulled off tricks every bit as astonishing as turning water into wine.

In other words, it wasn't just his miraculous power that enhanced the rabbi's reputation. In fact, as has already been noted, the deed itself was almost concealed. No "keep your eye on the containers as I wave my wand" extravaganza in this instance.

Rather, what dazzled folks was the uncommon kindness this guest showed for his embarrassed host. That and the extravagance of his generosity.

Six tubs of wine at 20 to 30 gallons each comes to 150 gallons. Think of the party you could throw with over 30 cases of wine!

And this wasn't your Petri rose` in a jug sale-priced at the supermarket this week only. This was cabernet sauvignon vintage 2004. The best, and plenty of it.

In other words, in this brief incident the author was suggesting that Jesus is the kind of person who will overcome the meanest and most embarrassing of predicaments. And he will do it with style, circumspectly yet generously.

Whether this is a significant event for you is almost beside the point. This is a religious judgment, of course, and if you're not impressed by the religious claims of Jesus' adherents, the story of how their leader turned water into wine may not overawe you.

On the other hand, you might be impressed by the restrained way the story is told in John's gospel. It could have been turned into a flamboyant expose` of divine power.

Instead it comes across as an unpretentious witness to a man who cared enough to help someone out of an embarrassing predicament.