

Sunday, January 20, 2013: Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

In the Lectionary
January 8, 2013

In a famous 1970s television commercial, legendary movie actor and director Orson Welles held up a glass of wine. While Beethoven's Fifth Symphony played in the background, Welles declared in his deep bass voice, speaking on behalf of a winemaker: "We will sell no wine before its time."

Wine making takes time, from planting, growing and pruning the vines to picking the grapes and crushing them, followed by the complicated processes of fermentation, filtration and bottling, not to mention marketing, which is where Orson Welles came in. Vinification, the process of wine making, is an extended ordeal.

Like wine making, the Gospel of John's account of Jesus at the wedding in Cana is all about timing. When Jesus' mother told him that the wine had run out, he said in his reply, "My hour has not yet come."

Yet Jesus stepped in at exactly the right time, said the right thing—"Fill the jars with water"—and performed his first miracle, making what must have been absolutely awesome wine.

When the steward praised the bridegroom, saying, "You have kept the good wine until now," John hinted at the patience that necessarily accompanies faith. Patience provides endurance because it is premised upon future confidence and hope. Marriages themselves are a result of lengthy social dynamics between a bride and bridegroom that cannot be rushed. The marriage begins with a wedding, but it relies on time and mutual decisions to become a lifelong covenant.

Isaiah 62:1-5 uses the marriage metaphor to describe God's relationship with Zion: "For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you."

After the grief, despair, exploitation, abuse, loneliness and seeming abandonment of Israel to a desolate condition, God affirms that for the sake of Zion and Jerusalem, “I will not keep silent” and “will not rest.” Just as a marriage results in a new name, Israel will have a new status and a “new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow.” Israel will be vindicated among nations. It will shine like the dawn and “a blazing torch.” You will be called “hephzibah [meaning “my delight is in her”] and your land Beulah [“married”],” Isaiah states on behalf of the Lord.

This poem, which some scholars believe was a song of hope, gave its readers and listeners a sense of confidence, hope and patience. Their future would be bright “like the dawn,” their “salvation like a blazing torch.” Could it be that Isaiah’s description of God’s embrace and marriage of Zion was the reason Jesus’ first miracle was at a wedding?

Both the Old Testament and New Testament passages emphasize God’s special timing. Isaiah’s text encourages his readers with a sense of anticipation, predicated upon God’s promises of vindication and salvation for Zion. The Cana wedding also invokes a future orientation, especially with Jesus’ statement “my hour has not yet come,” a theme which appears later in John after “the authorities” tried to arrest him but “no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come” (John 7:30).

The text on spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:1-11) stresses the varieties of spiritual gifts in the service of the Lord. The passage begins with the declaration that “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.” Whether the gift is “the utterance of wisdom,” “the utterance of knowledge,” “gifts of healing,” “faith,” “working of miracles,” “prophecy” or a “discernment of spirits,” Paul states, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” A challenge facing any leader is to bring together the multifaceted gifts of the individuals in a group. This task is made easier by focusing on mission. When focused on the premise that “Jesus is Lord,” Paul is stating, each person’s unique gifts will complement the gifts of others and advance the common good.

While the Corinthians text does not directly match the texts from Isaiah and John, Paul’s reference to the Holy Spirit’s “activation” and allotment of gifts “to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses” points toward God’s activity in our lives, which takes place in time and space. Again, the biblical theme of waiting for God’s perfect timing is sounded. God vindicates Zion, turns water into wine and distributes spiritual gifts, all at the optimal moment—never “before its time,” as Orson Welles might say.