



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Fear of Weddings."**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Isaiah 62:1-5
Second Reading 1 Corinthians 12:1-11
Gospel John 2:1-11

The famous Christmas carol says that it is in the little town of Bethlehem that "the hopes and fears of all the years" meet, but I would suggest that it also does so at weddings. In my ministry I have been part of all kinds of weddings, good and really awful. I have seen brides faint, grooms get violently sick, flower girls refuse to walk and the power go off. Here at Holy Trinity alone I have seen a wedding coordinator take a mobile phone call in the middle of the service and deliver a message to the bride; have discovered to my horror that a bride actually didn't speak either English or Tagalog; and have had a bride who didn't attend the rehearsal in order to fit in her appointment at the beauty shop. But there are happy weddings, too, when everything works according to plan, when the bride and the groom are really focused on the spiritual aspect of what they are doing, and in which the greatest concern has been not spending lots of money, but offering lots of prayers.

It is therefore significant to me as a professional wedding participant that Christ's first miracle takes place at a wedding reception. We don't hear anything about the wedding itself- we don't even know who the couple getting married is. We do hear that it's a big enough affair to require what we would call a wedding coordinator and that even friends-of-friends, notably Jesus' disciples, are invited to the party.

Each part of the Wedding at Cana has been dealt with in detail by preachers over the years: the use of the Jewish ritual water jars, the unclear relationship of Jesus with his Mother, and the way in which Jesus seems almost forced to perform before he feels ready to do so.

What I would like to speak about today is the choice or chance of it being a wedding where this miracle takes place. Weddings are dangerous.

What do I mean by that? I mean that, like birth and death, a wedding is a climactic event in human life- a time when natural forces and spiritual realities collide and combine- when people dress up and act differently out of respect that something special is happening. Families are entering into relationships; sometimes money and land are changing hands. The possibility of new life is being celebrated and provided for, and the great and dangerous mystery of sex is being made licit. All these things are, indeed, "hopes and fears" of years, and families and generations, met in a man and a woman exchanging promises and rings.

Marriage is called a "covenant" in the words of the Prayer Book rite- a formal relationship of mutual agreement. It reminds us that God's relationship with humanity has been refined through the use of Covenants: first with the people of Israel and then through Christ with all the world. This is what makes weddings such solemn affairs, and why "gimmick" weddings celebrated in hot-air balloons or under water seem, well, just wrong. Like extra-marital relations, the fun is there without the responsibility. It's the reception without the service.

I have lost track of the current figures, but something like two out of every three marriages in the United States ends in divorce. That means that every couple I prepare for marriage is entering a minefield, and really healthy, really strong marriages are an endangered species. I can see it in the eyes of those who attend weddings- the tears are not only those of joy, but also of concern and, yes, fear. Will this couple make it? Will the joy and the love last? No one really knows. Couples with strong religious faith do seem to have a better chance, but a church wedding is not

in itself a guarantee. Marriage is dangerous. Weddings are by their very nature frightening.

Christ appears at the wedding in Cana almost as an "extra." He's not there as the groom or the best man. He's not a sponsor: a ninong, or a member of the family (as far as we know). He really doesn't seem to want to get involved until Mary forces his hand. But when he acts, it is full of symbolism. Suddenly he is no longer just an anonymous wedding guest, but a kind of second Bridegroom, entering into a covenant relationship with those invited to share in a cosmic wedding feast in the presence of God. The wine that is miraculously provided usually represents the richness of the earth- sunshine, rain and nutrients combined to provide the stuff of celebration and hope. But it is also the stuff of fear.

Paintings Mary and Jesus from the Baroque period, such as we can see in the oldest churches here in the Philippines, sometimes show the Christ Child squeezing a bunch of grapes: a troubling symbol both of the wine of Cana and the wine of the Last Supper signaling his death on the Cross. Wine is dangerous- in sufficient quantity it is a poison. Wine to an alcoholic is a terrible curse- chemically and psychologically binding the addict to a life of dependency and horror. It is with eyes wide open to the dangers that the Church maintains the use of wine in its sacrament of Holy Communion. Like Christ's own life, nothing comes without the possibility of misuse and misinterpretation. Nothing comes without risk.

Yet, the risk is worth it. You see, I also have happy memories of weddings that I have been part of: the one in a tiny chapel of a ruined German castle that concluded with folk dancing all afternoon and which has resulted in a happy, loving Christian family active in their local church; the Chinese wedding that resulted in active new parish members; or the normalization of a relationship gone wrong, but set right with God's help. These things help me to understand why Christ decided to allow his first miracle to take place at such a volatile venue as a wedding. A wedding- a place and time when a couple tries to beat the odds, when relationships are begun and immediately put on trial, and when a covenant between a man and a woman becomes the sign of Christ's relationship with his Church. Powerful stuff that- not

just a matter of receptions and caterers. It is, rather, the revelation of God's interest in the real stuff of human life- hopes and fears and all.