



Santo Niño Mass

Homily

**Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

**Sunday 16 January 2022
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

The Gospel reading to which we have just listened is one of only two occasions when the mother of Jesus is mentioned in Saint John's Gospel. The other, of course, is the account in John's Gospel of the death of Jesus in which particular mention is made of the presence of Mary at the foot of the cross, together with the beloved disciple.

If we were only interested in statistics, we might be tempted to think that because Mary only appears twice, she is not a very important figure in the understanding of Christ and of the mystery of our faith in John's gospel.

If this were true, of course, it would mean that the Church over the last 2000 years has greatly exaggerated the importance of Mary. It would also mean that the very strong devotion in the Filipino Church to Mary, the mother of the Santo Niño, does not stand on very solid foundations.

However, to think this way would be to misunderstand both the gospels themselves and the role of the Church in guiding us to a deeper appreciation of the meaning of the gospels and ultimately of the true identity of Christ the Lord.

Saint John's Gospel was the last of the four gospels to be finally written down and may have reached its final form, as we know it today, perhaps as many as seventy years after the death and resurrection of Christ. What this means is that when this gospel was finally completed it was the result of seventy years of prayer, of reflection and of study of the traditions concerning Jesus which came to the early Church from the apostles and disciples themselves. The Gospel of St John, therefore, is not simply some disinterested re-telling of the events of the life of Jesus. It is the product of deep faith and assumed its final form under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The writer of the gospel himself tells us, at the end of the gospel, that there were many other things which Jesus said and did which were not written down in the gospel and that what was there was the result of a Spirit-led selection of various events from the life of Jesus, chosen to reveal some of the most important truths about Jesus which the early Church gradually came to understand more fully as time went by.



Because of this, the really important question for us to ask ourselves is not why there are only two stories in which the mother of Jesus appears. The real question is why, out of the many things the writer of the gospel might have chosen, he chose these two stories and gave Mary such a prominent place in both of them.

Today's gospel story, the miracle at Cana, takes place at the very beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. In fact, the author himself tells us that the miracle of changing the water into wine was the very first of the great signs which Jesus worked, and was the one which led to the birth of faith in his disciples. The disciples were already following him but it is very likely that they were doing so mainly out of curiosity or out of human admiration for him. He was, after all, a remarkable man with a powerful personality and gentleness, and an integrity which drew people to him. It was the miracle which made the disciples see something greater, something deeper, in Jesus and their admiration **for** him turned into faith **in** him. Mary, on the other hand, is presented in this story as someone who is already full of faith. She comes to Jesus, her son, and draws attention to the great need of the young bride and groom. Even though Jesus's response to her at first seems rather strange it is clear, as the story unfolds, that Mary does not have a moment's doubt that Jesus will respond to the need of this young couple. She immediately goes to the stewards and says to them quite simply, *"You do whatever he tells you to do"*. They do as she says, although they must have wondered what Jesus wanted with all those large containers of water, and at the word of Jesus the water becomes wine.

At a human level the miracle itself is an astounding one but, of course, as is so often the case with Jesus, there is something much deeper going on. The wine which Jesus provides so abundantly for the wedding is a sign both of the extraordinary generosity of God who pours gifts on us without measure and often in spite of our ingratitude, and also of the blood of Jesus which will be completely poured out on the cross to set us free from sin and bring us the fullness of life. For just as at Cana Jesus turned water into wine, so at the Last Supper he will turn wine into his blood poured out in love for us. The joy which the new wine at Cana brought to the newly married couple and their guests is really nothing compared to the joy which comes to us as we celebrate the Eucharist and partake, in Holy Communion, in the Lord's body and blood.

It is no accident, therefore, that John's gospel draws our attention to these two occasions to highlight the role of Mary. She is present at the very beginning of Jesus's public ministry of preaching, teaching and healing, and she is still there, full of faith and trust, at the end of his public ministry, as he gives his life for us. Saint John's Gospel wants us to realise that Mary is a constant companion in the work of her Son. She was present as the Church came into being and she remains present today as the mother who has been given to us by Jesus as he died on the cross.

Along with the Catholic Church throughout the ages, the Church in the Philippines has always understood instinctively the importance of Mary. Filipino Catholics know that wherever Jesus is so, too, is his mother. It was she who conceived the Santa Niño in faith and trust. It was she who gave birth to the Santo Niño in Bethlehem. It was she who cared for him, loved him, and guided



and protected him as he grew into, first, the child, and then the man who would call people to the fullness of life. It was her faith, her unwavering faith, which gave rise to the first of Jesus's great signs, the changing of the water into wine at Cana. And it was Mary who, together with the beloved disciple, remained at the foot of the cross as Jesus gave up his life when all his other disciples had deserted him in fear.

Mary is the precious gift of the Santo Niño to his Church and to all of us. She loves us with a mother's love, encourages us by the example of her unfailing faith, and supports us day by day with a mother's prayers. Today, and every day, she says to us the very same thing she said to the stewards at the wedding feast in Cana, "*You do whatever he, Jesus, tells you to do*". Through her prayers may we be given the courage to do just that.