

What God creates is . . . miraculous and we don't wonder about it. Once there was nothing and now there is a world.

The above is a quote from Saint Caesarius. He was a bishop of the French city of Arles around 500 AD. He was also a sign of the times for he was part Roman (Latin) and part German, resulting from the old, now shaky Roman Empire's inundation by German tribes from the forests east of the Rhine River. And Caesarius' job was to Christianize and civilize these pagan newcomers.

And one major thing he had to worry about was the newcomers' fascination with biblical miracle stories. There was the danger that they might be so fascinated by the miraculous in the Gospels (Jesus walking on water or raising a dead man to life) that they might miss the Gospel miracles' *more radical intent* upon human beings in general. So Saint Caesarius wrote copiously about that deeper sense of such episodes, namely that they were not just marvelous deeds of long ago but relevant far beyond their factual description.

For instance, in dealing with the episode where Jesus changes water into wine, Caesarius says Jesus didn't just displace the water with wine – rather he *let the water stay but changed its quality* – which is what Christ came to do in relation to everything in this world. Until Christ, people lived on some watery kind of superstition or philosophy, insipid, stale – even the old Law of Moses. Nor did Christ come to displace those traditions, to pour humanity's prior heritages down the drain – but to improve their quality. As Caesarius said, *The measure remains the same in quantity, but grace is added in quality . . . that waters retain their fullness* [there is much that is rich in old traditions] *but by a secret infusion they receive another kind of power*. In other words, the Church did not exist to puritanically annihilate the values of prior cultures and certainly not the Hebrew Testament, but baptized them in the belief that nothing human is without the potential to become divine.

Or to take another example in reference to Old Testament prophecies – when after his resurrection Jesus (unrecognized) was having dinner at Emmaus with two sad disciples. They expressed their disappointment over Jesus' crucifixion. They had read the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah and the liberation of Israel literally – in other words had imbibed them as if they were water, as if they were purely political in intent, back to the good old days of King David. But Jesus then walked them through the Old Testament and as he did so those prophecies became wine. He unfolded their deeper, universal reach beyond Israel's political hopes. And Caesarius goes on to say that after Jesus had changed their watery sense of prophecy into something as sparkling as wine they themselves were no longer cold or lukewarm but aglow with the Holy Spirit – “For now,” says Caesarius, “through the grace of Christ who had interpreted the Scripture for them, they had drunk spiritual wine.”

Christians nowadays bemoan the changing times, the secularization of our world, the seeming decline of Church influence, the attraction of other cultures than the one we have known. Our times are not unlike those of Caesarius' day – but he rather than moan was convinced of the universal reach of our Judeo-Christian heritage, its capacity to include all that was good in every culture – in other words its catholicity in other than the parochial sense of the word catholic. Where we as believers may still see in the expanding world around us only tasteless water, there may be plentiful wine.