

16th July 2023 – The People of God #7 ‘The Bride’ (Revelation 21:1-7, Mark 2:18-20)

It's strange for me today to be preaching on Revelation chapter 21. I've actually preached on this passage more than 30 times, possibly more than any other passage. However, until now I've only ever preached on this passage at a *funeral* – which, when you think about it, is a bit strange, given that the vision St John sees is of a *wedding*. It is what you might call **the great cosmic wedding: between Jesus and his people.**

And in St John's vision, he sees the redeemed people of God – described in the text as the 'new Jerusalem', but that includes all of us followers of Jesus – making a grand entrance into the new creation, much like the entry of a bride on the big wedding day. And the joyful groom is none other than God himself. As the bride makes her grand entry, the eternal wedding service begins with these words, not 'Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today...' but 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.'

It's quite a vision, isn't it? And, today, we ask ourselves the question – he did we get here? Or rather, how will we get here: since, after all, it's a future-looking vision. Among the many images of God's people in the bible, most will strike as easy to grasp – a family, a body, a light – these all make natural sense to us; but a marriage? A wedding? How does it help us to view the Church as the bride of Christ? In a few minutes today, I hope to help us find out...

Let's start by recognising that **this image is one which develops through the whole of Scripture.** So, a faithful union between a man and woman is given right at the start of the bible (in Genesis ch2) as a core building block of human relationships; Adam and Eve become one flesh. And, whilst the bible is refreshingly candid throughout about the challenges of nurturing stable family relationships, and the complexities of family life in our fallen world, the real foundations of what we're going to look at today can be found in God's encounters first with Noah and then, more significantly with Abraham. It is here, in the early chapters of the bible, that we see God making *covenants* with people.

The idea of a covenant is really the big idea we're thinking about today. It's a solemn promise of committed, unconditional love. It's not a contract, because a covenant is meant to be unbreakable – whilst the terms might indeed be broken, a covenant can be renewed in the way that a contract can't. And in the bible, God first makes a covenant with all of humanity after the flood, and then specifically and much more intimately several times with Abraham and his descendants. And God's covenant with Abraham basically boils down to: 'I will be your God and you will be my people; I will love you, bless you and give you a place to live, and all you have to do is love me and trust me in return.'

This covenant is then developed under Moses with the law – so that God's blessing now includes a template for how to live, and Israel's trust is demonstrated by trying to live out that template. As the Old Testament develops, we get increasing references which see this covenant between God and his people like a marriage. When Israel persistently breaks the law, she is referred to as an unfaithful partner. The prophet Hosea even has an unfaithful wife as a living example to preach to the people about their unfaithfulness to God. On the other hand, Solomon's racy Song of Songs is often interpreted as, not just an erotic wedding poem, but a picture of the powerful love of a faithful God successfully wooing his people, and (ideally) of the people responding equally lovingly to God.

By the time we get to the New Testament, St Paul goes even further by hinting that marriage itself might have been given to human beings as a permanent illustration of just how close the relationship between human beings and God is meant to be. Here's what he says in Ephesians 5, quoting Genesis 2: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church.'

What if, Paul seems to be saying, we only have human marriage at all to show us just how much God loves us and what our relationship to God could be and should be? Now there's a thought....

So why is this image of the church as being like a bride for God a useful one? Essentially, it's all about the things that we value in a healthy marriage:

Firstly, it is a picture of intimacy. We are more than just servants or even just children of God – we can experience with God the closeness of a good marriage. We share everything. There are lots of great spiritual writers who developed this theme, and although we need to be careful with language of 'lover' and 'beloved', it is helpful to picture God as someone who cherishes his people. God describes his people as the apple of his eye, he adores them, he delights in them.

Perhaps some of us here today need to be reminded that **God doesn't just love you, he actually likes you. He cherishes you.** So many of us think that only loves us because he has to – we're kind of tolerated. But this image reminds us that God loves us because he likes us. He is proud of us, he wants to tell the renewed creation: look how amazing my bride is!

Second, it is a picture of faithfulness. As I said a covenant can't be broken – even in modern-day law. For example, in the part of Streatham where we used to live (in south London), there were no pubs. The reason is that, back in the 17th century, the land was owned by a Quaker family and they had attached a covenant to the land, which forbade it. Even 300 years later it could not be changed. Despite being an ideal location for a pub, if you wanted a beer, you had to walk a bit further!

Similarly, if we return to our main theme of marriage, the biggest difference between a Christian and a civil wedding is that little word 'covenant' once again. As I explain to our prospective wedding couples, a civil marriage is a contract – in the civil ceremony the key moment is what's called the 'contracting words', note the language used; but a Christian marriage, on the other hand, is a covenant – an *unconditional* vow, for better for worse etc. Or as I declare to the congregation on the day itself: 'That which God has joined together, let no-one put asunder.'

And for us as God's people, to be known as his covenant bride reminds us that God is faithful to us. He keeps his word. He loves unconditionally. The key biblical word here, which is used 248 times in the Old Testament to describe God, is 'chesed' – which in its root captures two different ideas, that of 'eager desire' and of 'kindness'. In modern translations it is therefore usually translated as loving kindness, but it's so important to note that this loving kindness is God's eager desire, not grudging offering. God's unconditional love is eagerly offered.

And our calling, too, of course is to be faithful to him, to show that same unconditional love, both to him and to others. The old image of faithfulness in marriage is still just as true now; as Christ's bride we dedicate ourselves to loving him, even as we rejoice in his constant love for us.

Finally, there is one more strand to this marriage bow, as it were – and that is the undertone of **celebration**; because as the bible goes on, the image of God's union with his people focuses increasingly on **the image of a wedding feast.** Jesus used this idea a number of times, for example in our short gospel passage in Mark – and we see it finally realised in Revelation ch21. To be the bride of Christ is a picture of intimacy and faithfulness yes, but also joyful celebration. The bridegroom waits eagerly for his bride – and so, at the end of time, we are united eternally, amidst great joy and celebration. All tears are wiped away, all is made new, the relationship shines brightly for ever.

This is our future – but it is also our present. As I draw to a close, what I want us to take away is that sense that **God desires to be close to us.** That he cherishes us. That his faithfulness is not just an act of will but a *choice*, a joyful, loving commitment gladly given for the apple of his eye. This is how God sees you. May God give us all grace to see ourselves, and our fellow believers in this way, too. Amen.