

*Epiphany 3 2013*

This year so far we have 26 wedding booked at the church - a lot fewer than in years past when virtually all weddings took place in a church, but more than most churches. Each of these couples will be busy preparing, looking forward to the special day when they say their vows. They are in love, they want to commit their lives to each other. Here in this church, most brides still stick to the tradition of being walked up the aisle by their father and being given away by their father. It is symbolic, a leaving behind of the old family and the start of something new.

Thank goodness very few bridegrooms now have their stag night the night before the marriage service, so they arrive in good time for the service, waiting anxiously, and their delight at seeing their bride walk down the aisle is a really special moment.

Throughout the bible the imagery of weddings is used extensively. In the Old Testament it is God who is the bridegroom and Israel the Bride, and this theme occurs particularly in the prophet Hosea, but also in Jeremiah, Ezekiel and in today's reading from Isaiah. But, we cannot take this metaphor and relate it precisely to a modern wedding, where it is all about the intimate one-to-one relationship. These biblical references are all about God's relationship with a community, not with an individual. . In Hosea the wife is adulterous and her husband waiting for her to come to her senses and return to him. In Isaiah, in this passage, God has left Israel because of her transgressions, and the wife Israel is deserted and without hope of children. The language is actually explicitly sexual :

You shall no more be termed Forsaken,  
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;  
but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,  
and your land Married;  
for the LORD delights in you,  
and your land shall be married.  
For as a young man marries a young woman,  
so shall your builder marry you,  
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,  
so shall your God rejoice over you.

The Hebrew word used for Married is *b'ulah* which comes from the verb Ba'al, to own or to rule, and it would have had very particular resonance and refers to very old traditions of Israel relating to fertility. If we want to look at how this relates to a Christian marriage service, we might be better

looking at the preface of the 1662 marriage service rather than Common Worship. Israel, cast aside is now once more the object of God's delight. There will be new creation, new life. God who could destroy has forgiven and will restore. Normal marital relations have been restored. The marriage contract is made. God will play his part as the bridegroom.

It is this Jewish tradition that influenced John when he wrote his gospel. The wedding at Cana, the story that is repeated at every wedding service, is the occasion according to St John of Jesus's first miracle. It is a deeply symbolic story.

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee.

What third day? This sentence is preceded by a series of encounters. The first was with John the Baptist who testifies that Jesus is the Son of God. The next day Jesus encounters Andrew who follows him and goes and gets his brother Simon Peter to come along as well. Then, the next day, Jesus goes to Galilee and meets Nathaniel. And it is on the third day after this that Jesus goes to the wedding in Cana.

Yet for John, writer of this gospel, there is a strong sense that he is not really concerned about the chronology, but about symbolism.

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee.

On the third day he rose again.

On the third day, after all the talk and conjecture, Jesus reveals who he is. He reveals the mystery, the wonder, the miraculous.

For John, Jesus is the bridegroom, and there is a wonderful irony that here he is with his friends as a guest at a wedding. The bridegroom was responsible for the celebrations, the rejoicing over his new bride. But on this occasion, the nameless bridegroom had failed to provide enough wine. Yet the real bridegroom, the true lover of Israel was able to provide huge quantities of amazing wine.

There is a human element in the story too. Already we can see the tension between Jesus and his mother. As at a marriage, he is moving away emotionally from his birth family to his new family, which is the community of Israel. Yet, as in the Old testament, Israel is fickle.

Even so, Jesus, the bridegroom delights in his bride. He is faithful even if she is not. But the symbolism in this story goes even further. The wine was replenished not from any old water. The water for purification was transformed into the wine of communion. The old law has been replaced

by the grace present in the Eucharist. There is a bonding between Christ and his people, between the true bridegroom and the church. John is deliberately providing a link between this miracle, and the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The promise, the marriage covenant, is sealed with Christ's blood. He will never forsake us. He will always wait for us to turn back to him again.

At that wedding in Cana, the disciples saw what had happened and we are told they believed. Yet for all the other guests, all this would have been in the background, invisible. There might have been a short delay in the wine appearing, but then all would be as normal. For them, nothing miraculous or significant had taken place. The disciples knew though, and in time they could add this little piece of knowledge to the jigsaw they were completing and come to understand its significance. In the same way, at the resurrection, only a few met the risen Lord. Other people, if they knew of Jesus's name at all, thought it was just another criminal being crucified - perhaps unjustly, perhaps for political reasons. But those that knew, those that saw, had the opportunity to be changed, to re-evaluate their lives in the light of this mystery.

Of course, the mystery was there whether they saw it or not, just as God is always around us whether we acknowledge his presence or not.

We have all this knowledge, information about Jesus, letters written by his followers, huge tomes written by people who have made him their life's study, and yet it is still possible for us to be unchanged. Perhaps we do not acknowledge the mystery, for there is a mystery. And the mystery is that God so loves the world that he sent his only son to teach us about love, about justice, about kingdom values. To show us how we can be united with Christ, part of the body of Christ. How we can be that community for whom Jesus is the bridegroom.

John Chrysostom wrote:

'We become one body, members of his flesh and blood. ....He has, as it were, kneaded our bodies and his together, so that we might become one thing, a body joined to a head. This is what happens to those who love each other strongly.....Christ has done this for us, to bring us into a deeper love, and to show his love for us. He has given to those who desire him not merely to see him, but to touch, bite, eat, embrace his flesh, and so satisfy all their love.'

John Chrysostom unashamedly uses the language of love and marriage. God delights in us. But, and here I think I would differ from St John Chrysostom, it is never about just me and Jesus, no one person can never be the bride of Christ. It is always about us and Christ. Unless we are one, unless

we care for each other, demonstrate love for each other, we can never even begin to delight in God as he delights in us.

If we are to be a part of the body of Christ, whatever gifts we have, the one overriding criterion is that we must delight in God, and delight in each other.

Amen.