

Sermon 24.01.21 – Wedding at Cana

Prayer

“As the deer pants for water, may I long for you, O God” Father, awaken in each of us a longing for you this morning.

In preparation for speaking to you today I recalled that I have preached on this passage before – it was exactly six years ago – perhaps I can just re-hash that sermon I thought! After all most people won't remember what I said six minutes ago, let alone six years ago!

But then I thought – has God really not got something new, something more, to say? Have our context and circumstances not changed, have we not grown as a church and as people – can I really serve “old wine”?? No, clearly not – it's time to knuckle down and speak out new wine for today.

So I want to start today by looking a little at the marriage motif as it runs right through scripture, and in particular is present in both today's readings – John's account of the wedding at Cana, the first of Jesus “signs” at the start of his ministry, and his account in Revelations of the call to the wedding feast of the Lamb. Throughout the scriptures we read of God or Christ as the Groom, and the people or the church as his Bride – what does this mean?

To begin understanding we need to first think about what John's first century audience would have known as the normal process for a Jewish marriage.

Most marriages at that time would not have been some happy accident of romantic attraction, but would have been arranged with the wider families of both Bride and Groom involved in seeking out suitable partners for their offspring. Certainly there was opportunity for the young people to form an initial attraction, but then there would have been a meeting between the two families and agreement of a “Bride Price”.

As soon as I mention that I can imagine your hackles rising at the thought of “selling one's daughter” – but that is to completely miss the cultural understanding. We tend to regard such things as an economic transaction, but in a culture based on Honour and Shame, as is still prevalent in the middle east, the giving of lavish gifts is seen as a way of honouring the recipient. The bigger the gift, the greater the honour bestowed on the receiver – the same thinking underpins the approach to hospitality – a stranger is treated to a lavish meal as a way of honouring their arrival and visit. The gift of the “Bride Price”, which would be a very substantial sum often saved up from birth, was a way of honouring the bride's family and recognising her beauty, purity, and her character.

At the end of the meeting of the two families the bride price would be paid, and the Bride and Groom's fathers, and the groom, would drink the Cup of Celebration to signify that there was now a binding covenant between the families, and that the Bride and Groom were “Betrothed” – a formal legal status that could only be ended by divorce.

The groom and his father then prepared to leave, and the groom and bride would be separated typically for several months. As he leaves the Groom would declare: “I go to

prepare a place for you; I will come again and receive you to myself that you may be where I am also". Do those words seem familiar? Of course they do, they are echoed by Jesus as he departs at the end of his earthly ministry – a time where he has visited and paid the ultimate bride price – he has laid down his life, his blood, as the ultimate "price" for his bride – his church, us. We live in a state of being "betrothed" to Christ.

Betrothal was a time of preparation. The Groom would build a room in his family home ready to receive his bride. Again we hear Jesus words in John 14:2 anew – "My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." Jesus is using an image and language that his listeners would completely understand as the language of betrothal and marriage!

At the same time the bride would be preparing in her family home. The wider family would coach her in how to be a good wife, and good mother. Her young bridesmaids would ensure she had her wedding dress and was ready in terms of hair and beauty. They would also ensure that everything was ready for the groom's return – remember the parable of the ten virgins, and their being ready with lamps and oil – another marriage story.

Through this time too the bride and groom's longing for each other would be growing – absence makes the heart grow fonder! I can certainly recall times when as a young man I was separated from my girl for a while – how I would long and sigh for her loving eyes, her gentle voice, the scent of her skin, her soft touch! I would be determined to give her my very best, preparing special gifts for the day we could be together – not just a bunch of petrol-station flowers! I built furniture, bought her favourite perfume, wrote special letters, even wrote songs – longing for that day. Take time to read Song of Songs – a scripture that a young couple in Jesus day would be very familiar with, to get the sense of longing and excitement that was building!

And there is another important thing to note here – unlike our weddings today, there was no date fixed. Only the Groom's father knew the time, not even the Groom! The father alone would decide when the time was right – when the preparations of the home and the heart had reached the point where it was time to dispatch his son to start the wedding celebrations! So it's no surprise that in talking about his return Jesus declares "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matt 24:36) – Jesus is once again using wedding language to describe his return.

Finally the day, or rather more usually night, arrives – the father despatches the Groom and his attendant friends to collect the bride! It will be a complete surprise! The Best man runs on ahead of the party to the bride's home, announcing his arrival there with a long blast on his Shofar (a simple trumpet made from a ram's horn), followed by a loud shout: "Behold the Bridegroom!"

At this the Bride and her attendants would quickly rise and dress, and lighting their lamps, would join the Groom for the return journey. The bridesmaids lamps would light the way for the party, and the groomsmen provide protection. The closest family would follow close behind, and at the Groom's home they would be welcomed in, the doors closed, and the wedding feast would begin!

It was a lengthy affair – on the first day it was just the bride and groom, their attendants, and immediate family; on the second day they would be joined by both their wider families; and on the third day the two communities would join the festivities which would continue up to the seventh day! Now that’s what I call a party! Of course the quantity and quality of the food and drink, the core of hospitality, were to show the honour to be bestowed on all invited to attend – running out of anything, especially wine, will bring huge shame on not only the groom’s family, but all those attending.

So, now let us turn back to our two scriptures for today and see how the original audience might have understood them.

“On the third day” begins the gospel account. Now many theologians have written huge tomes linking the timeline at the start of John’s gospel to the creation account, and all sorts of theories exist as to what it might mean. My personal view is that the explanation is simpler – John is telling us that it was the third day of the wedding feast in Cana which means that Jesus is one of the wider community invited, rather than a member of the extended family – that’s who is present on the third day of the feast!

As the incident starts to unfold it becomes clear that Mary feels some sense of responsibility for the catering – perhaps she is a member of the Groom’s extended family and has been there from the second day – it might help explain Jesus’ slightly awkward reply of: “Why do you involve me?”.

And Jesus continues “My hour is not yet come?” We tend to interpret this as “I haven’t started my ministry yet”, but I think it has a deeper meaning – I am not yet betrothed – I haven’t yet paid the “bride price” – the price that will bring honour and take away shame. Jesus knows what lies ahead for him, that he must lay down his life for his bride the church to take away her shame, but he hasn’t yet reached that hour – the new covenant of betrothal is not yet sealed.

None the less, Mary has faith – she approached Jesus as his Mum, but she acts from the conversation in faith – “Do whatever he tells you” she says to the servants – words we would do well to remember for ourselves – are we prepared to “do whatever he tells us”?

And then there’s the miracle – the ‘sign’ as John calls it – transforming a huge volume of water into the best wine the steward has ever tasted. John’s intent throughout his Gospel is to show us that Jesus is both God AND man. There is of course huge spiritual significance in the changing of the water of cleansing into the wine of celebration, the removal of shame and the bringing of honour, but I think John’s sign is as much about simply showing that God breaks right into creation and acts physically to change the nature of the physical world. John has started his gospel declaring God’s hand in creation - “In the beginning was the word...” – the Logos – Jesus there bringing the universe into being – and now here he is incarnate in his own creation, and his first “sign” confirms his power to transform the physical world – confirms that he is God.

The reaction of the steward too has huge significance now we understand the cultural norms. “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now”. Of course you serve the best wine first – on the first day the most honoured guests are present, then the wider family, and on

the third day the whole community. By running out of wine you bring shame on all the community, not just the groom's family. But Jesus' action has changed all that – his "new wine" is the finest anyone has ever tasted – and it's being made available to everyone, not just a close inner circle of family! Everyone can drink of this new wine, and with over 1000 bottles of the stuff there is no chance it's going to run out!

His "sign" says: Look, I am God right here physically in your midst – and I bring you the best wine, the greatest honour, and it is open to all!" He has taken away the shame and replaced it with honour! The disciples get the message – "They beheld the glory, the power, the majesty of the Lord!" Do we??

And now let's stand back a bit for a moment, and reflect on the wider use of marriage across the span of the scriptures. Marriage is instituted at the very outset in the creation narrative – God is giving mankind a purpose, to steward his creation so that it resonates to the glory of God, and he recognises that the job is too big for just Adam and Eve – so he gives them marriage as the place to become a family, and he blesses them with the ability to become "one flesh" – to reflect an intimacy so complete that it reflects the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and creates new life. The stories of marriages, some good, some bad, run right through the old Testament, and we have the wonderful description of the longing of two lovers in the Song of Songs. Then Jesus breaks into our world, and even though he has not yet "paid the bride price" he acts to take away shame and bring honour to all who attend a wedding, and at the end of time, as our reading from Revelations today makes clear, he will return as the groom returns to claim his bride, and will lead us into the "wedding Feast of the Lamb".

Only the Father knows when that day will be, and he will not send the Groom until he is sure that all has been properly prepared – both physically, and spiritually.

And the implication is clear – we, as the church, the betrothed bride, should be making ourselves ready! Yes, we will be washed spotless by the blood of the lamb, our shame will be removed, but are we really preparing – are we growing in longing?

Most of us have longed for something – it may have been our lover, our spouse, but it may have been for a special possession, a new car, a special piece of jewellery! Perhaps it was more mundane – longing for a sip of water when thirsty, or for a bite of food when starving – that all-consuming sense of longing – picturing the moment and how we will savour it. Are we longing like that for Christ's return?

Remember the parable of the ten virgins – five had prepared with oil, but five hadn't. As well as being used in lamps, oil in the scriptures is also specially used for anointing – for being anointed with the holy spirit. Are we letting the anointing of the holy spirit flood into our lives – letting the oil flow over us? Remember five virgins asked the others to lend them some oil, but they refused – you can't borrow someone else's anointing – you have to seek and buy your own! And remember too what happened to the five foolish virgins – they arrived too late at the feast and the door was shut – they were part of the brides party, part of the church, but they weren't equipped with oil – that should make each of us think very hard!

Are we as a church readying ourselves for the coming of the groom? As evangelicals we tend to spend lots of time dwelling on Jesus as saviour, and Jesus as personal friend – but do we really think of ourselves as the bride to be, and Jesus as the groom? I believe Jesus is longing for us – his ardent love for us, his desire to be with us as groom, grows day by day – he is longing for the day when his father says “the day is come, all is prepared – go and fetch your bride!”. Are we longing with the same ardour? Are we keeping ourselves pure and chaste? Are our lamps and life primed with the oil of the Holy Spirit? Are our ears attuned to the call of the Shofar in the night? Is our attire ready to put on quickly so we may step excitedly into the night to accompany the groom to the feast?

Because that’s what the scriptures call us to do – that is why God gave us marriage as a sign, and why Jesus came into our physical world to pay the bride price, and calls us in this time of betrothal to get ourselves ready for the greatest party there ever will be – when he comes as groom to claim us, his bride, his church!