

A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Epiphany 3B

21/1/2018

Meanings of Marriage

Rev.19.6-10 Psalm 128 John 2.1-11

Is there any significance in the fact that Jesus' first 'sign', according to St John's Gospel, happened at a wedding?

The Bible is very interested in marriage: from the origin stories about Adam and Eve, through the early stories of Israel's ancestry and then in its later history, it's there; the books of the Laws deal with it; the Book of Proverbs has things to say about it, showing that it was a matter of reflection or the nation's wise men; one whole book, the *Song of Songs*, is nothing but a series of romantic –not to say erotic – love poems, with a marriage in the heart of it; some of the Psalms, like the one we sang today, focus on marriage and family life ...and so on. You might say this is all very understandable: the faith of the Bible is the faith of a community – indeed, it's faith *about* a community - a community under God. Of *course* the most important

relationships which bind that community together, and ensures that it carries on through history, are going to be important and evident in the books which carry and shape that faith. We would expect marriages to be included in its early legend and continuing history; It's understandable that there should be laws relating to marriage which is so important for any community. Indications, too, of the celebration that surrounds marriage and the kind of love which should be at marriage's heart, as well as some warning references to how it can go wrong. Sadly, however, a lot of these warnings have a distinctly chauvinist tendency – it's the nagging wife who's the problem; or the wife who leads her husband astray into worshipping alien gods....

So far, so unsurprising, given the historical context the Old Testament grew out of.. But then we turn to books of the prophets, and here references to marriage take a new and more mystical turn: instead of being something just on the human plane, marriage becomes a symbol, a metaphor, for God's own relationship with his people. The covenant he made with them at Sinai is like a marriage; it can be a matter of intense joy, or a matter of extreme grief, because God remains committed, but the people so often turn away from

him. The prophet Hosea, in particular, who himself experienced unfaithfulness by his wife, speaks in the name of the Lord, yearning for a day of perfect reconciliation, a return, as it were, to the desert – a recovery of the roots of the marriage:

‘Therefore, I will now persuade her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her...There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out for the land of Egypt...And I will take you for my wife for ever’ (Hosea 2.14, 15b, 19).

All this gives us the background to how the New Testament uses marriage as a symbol of God’s relationship with his people – no longer just the people of Israel, but the whole Church, all of us who are bound to Jesus through the New Covenant made by his blood; we are his bride – not individually, but as a community which is called to be faithful. And the day on which the meaning of this relationship is fully revealed will be like a great Marriage Feast, an image Jesus used several times in his parables. Today, we heard it again in our reading from Revelation. Every Holy Communion – which is a community event before it is an individual

experience - is a sign of that end-point towards which we move.

I should mention, however, that in later church history, the marriage imagery moved away from its strictly communitarian reference: the monastic writers of the Middle Ages interpreted some of the Scriptures about marriage to speak of the relationship of the individual soul with God; in fact, the *Song of Solomon*, understood in this sense, was the most widely written about book of the Bible in the Middle Ages! And nuns, even today, still wear wedding rings, to symbolise their marriage to Christ.

Perhaps all this symbolic meaning helps to explain why Jesus’ first ‘sign’ occurred in the context of a wedding: it was a sign that transformation is coming – through him; that the final transformation which we look forward to will flow from God’s overwhelming generosity (the symbolism of up to 180 gallons of wine is a strong picture of generosity - and of joy. These will be the keynotes of the marriage of the Lamb and his bride, the Church, whom he will present to himself made spotless and without blemish, as it says in Ephesians 5. It’s no mistake, I think, that the wine of joy

which appears in today's Gospel story, flows out of the water pots associated with cleansing – joy, cleansing and a new start in love and intimacy all belong together in the Church's relationship with Christ.

Transformation, indeed!

But 'Hey!', you might say – aren't there difficulties here for us modern Christians in this highly flown imagery about marriage? Is this how we are really to look forward to the final revelation of God's love, the final goal of the Church's journey through history? After all, as I've already alluded to, some of the Bible's attitudes to marriage are pretty chauvinist and far from egalitarian. Our picture of marriage has, to a large extent, changed (even though the majority of brides still do want to be 'presented' to their husbands by being 'given away', and wearing white dresses – signs of spotlessness). And then, there's the whole male/female thing: isn't it the case that it's precisely this imagery of Christ the bridegroom and the church his bride which has led people to believe, very deeply and sincerely, that those who represent Christ on earth and at the altar as priests, have to be male, so that the symbolism isn't compromised? Obviously, we don't go along with that in this church (!), but for some

of our fellow-Christians, including some of our fellow-Anglicans, this is something really important which they can't shift on. And I think we need to understand and respect that, and not pooh-pooh it, or treat them as irredeemable dinosaurs.

And then, a whole other layer of complication is added by the most recent changes that society has adopted in its idea of marriage – the possibility of marriage of a wife to a wife, or a husband to a husband. I'm pretty sure that within our congregation there are sharply differing views on that; the Church of England as a whole, and the Anglican Communion, is of course sharply riven, too, on this question; part, at least, of the animus in the debate comes from a deep sense that when we're talking about marriage, we're dealing with more than a relationship between individuals, but also about a metaphor which has held and conveyed deep truths to the church and in the Bible, but which won't go on working symbolically if its human terms of reference are so radically altered.

I don't think it's my job to tell you what to think, or to say what 'St Mary's believes' on this matter, which is a good thing, because I'm quite conflicted about it

myself! But I hope that I've at least been able to stimulate thought for a few minutes this morning about the significance of marriage as a metaphor in Scripture, and why it might have been so important that it was no mistake that the first Sign of Jesus took place at a wedding.

And despite everything – despite the ways in which marriage has undoubtedly changed and developed as a social phenomenon over history, and still differs today, from one culture to another – despite the many ways in which marriage can and does sometimes go terribly wrong - despite, too our current perplexities and debates - I'd like to end by drawing out some strands of truth which I hope all Christians can agree upon, some feelings I think we all share when we celebrate a wedding: First, It's a public beginning for a new future rooted in love; second, it's intended to be fruitful – in whatever way you understand that word – and outward looking.

Marriage is about love and union – two becoming one. It's about speaking-out a couple's commitment in the public forum, and thus acknowledging that our most significant relationships aren't purely private matters -

we owe faithfulness to our vows not just to our spouses, but also to society around, and to God, who witnessed them. And God, and the wider community, for their part, also commit themselves to supporting a marriage, and offering healing and strength when it's difficult, or when it sadly breaks.

In all these ways, marriage is about transformation; the water of our daily life transmuted into the new wine of the kingdom. That's why, whatever else we think, it's fundamentally a cause for celebration.