

## Bride of Christ – Minster HC 21/1/18

Prayer: Dear Lord, enfold us in your love, inspire us through your word, empower us by your Spirit and equip us for your service, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Text Rev.19<sup>6</sup> ... "The marriage of the lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready."

"The Churches one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord,

She is His new creation by water and the word,

From heaven he came and sought her

To be His holy bride, with His own blood He bought her

And for her life He died "

We live in anguished and perplexing times. The Church is under pressure from many directions and its membership is declining. As individual Christians we can sometimes feel isolated, puzzled, uneasy and just exhausted as we try to live out our faith day by day. If that's how we feel this morning, we should remind ourselves that we are part of the great stream of Christian history during which that state of affairs has been the rule rather than the exception for much of the time. We need to look among the treasures of scripture to find the hope, truth and inspiration which our predecessors have left in store for us. One such jewel is the passage from Revelation 19 which we heard read a few moments ago.

The island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea off the coast of Greece was once a Roman penal colony. Here St John the Divine, author of Revelation was a prisoner, probably sometime during the cruel reign of the Roman emperor Domitian between 81 -96 AD. During the day, John would have had to endure harsh manual labour in the blazing sun. In the evening he was pent up alone in a cave, exhausted and dispirited, anxious all the while about his fellow Christians back home who were being savagely and relentlessly persecuted. Under such pressure, the human mind descends to strange and disturbing places. John's writing in Revelation contains some of the darkest and most lurid passages in all scripture. One bishop has described parts of his book as pathological. But the bleakness and blackness are eventually dispersed, and the book ends with a thrilling and captivating depiction of hope and triumph.

John foresees the overthrow of the Roman empire which he portrays as Babylon, symbolising all the forces of evil in the world which war against the church and which will be utterly done away with when God's kingdom comes in the fullness of its glory. He describes the vision he's been granted of that amazing day in terms of a wedding.

The wedding of our younger son took place last July. The preparation period wasn't all plain sailing. My son and his fiancée each had health problems beforehand. They were each living hundreds of miles apart. An essential document couldn't be found. Then there were the logistical problems involved in bringing together over 130 guests from more than a dozen countries. At long last the wedding day dawned, and all went well. The day was filled with joy, love, faith and fun as the couple

exchanged their vows, embraced and later held each other close in a long, slow dance. Finally, their life together had begun. Love had won.

In the pages of his book, John the Divine worked through his anger, pain, perplexity, exhaustion and despair and was finally brought to the realisation that the love of God in Christ crucified is unconquerable.

When we are struggling at rock bottom and longing for God, we need to remind ourselves that God also longs for us. Psalm 132 describes God longing for his people: 'The Lord has chosen Zion for himself, he has desired her for his habitation' 'This shall be my resting place for ever; here will I dwell for I have longed for her. 'At his last meal with his friends. Jesus made it clear that Christians are the inheritors of that promise: "Those who love me will keep my word, and my father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. "Jesus yearned to gather God's people to himself. As he looked out across the city of Jerusalem for the final time, he was reduced to tears: "O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!"

The heart of divine love is grief-stricken by our rejection, but its strength is such that it can never give up on us. The prophet Hosea was led to marry a prostitute, a pagan priestess, faithless, as all the chosen people were, in order to demonstrate that God is willing to ally himself with sinners because he loves them so much: "How can I give you up?" says God, "how can I hand you over? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath."

At the heart of God's being is an inexhaustible exchange of unbroken love between Father Son and Holy Spirit, totally united as one entity. We exist as an expression of that love, and God longs to draw each of us into total union with him. When a dear Christian friend of mine knew she was dying, she said that she hoped to be "absorbed into God ". Knowing her deep faith, I'm certain that her wish has now been granted.

My friend had discovered that the cross is the gateway to union with God. As we gaze on the cross, we see God's total giving of himself to us in Jesus, the lamb of God. We see all evil, all sin and all suffering taken into his being, overwhelmed by his love and neutralised by his power. Our hearts and lives are transformed as we accept his invitation to be his partners in the dance of love—that is, to be 'in communion with him 'We are here together this morning because we want to draw near to him again, and feed on him in our hearts with thanksgiving. Our celebration today is a foretaste of the great feast in heaven which awaits us.

At Cana in Galilee, Jesus first miracle was an acted parable foretelling that feast, full of communion imagery. A bridegroom was at fault, having failed to provide sufficient wine for his guests—a huge social faux pas in that culture. Jesus, the church's bridegroom, stepped in and transformed water into finest quality wine. The water of baptism washes away our shortcomings and opens the way to communion with God as we share in this sacrament.

Yes, our bridegroom awaits us eagerly. He longs to lead us forward to the moment when history is ended. Then all heaven will erupt into an explosion of ecstasy as myriads of voices praise and glorify his name. Places have been reserved for us at the marriage supper of the lamb of God. We can experience the glorious day when the Church as the Bride of Christ will have made herself ready for utter and complete union with her Lord, clothed in the righteous deeds he has enabled her to perform for him as if they were the fine and pure linen of a wedding dress.

Are we prepared? Are we ready for him? Are we on tiptoes, all agog with expectation for his coming? Or are we like the foolish girls in the parable who didn't bother to get enough oil to keep their lamps burning to welcome the bridegroom when he arrived? Or the fellow in another parable who turned up to a wedding without taking the trouble to be suitably dressed for the occasion?

When I was confirmed, sixty years ago, we were given a little book which set out a detailed plan of preparation to be carried out the night before receiving Holy Communion. We were to prepare things to give thanks for, things to confess and specific things to pray for. We were also taught how to use the various silences which occur during the service. Wonderful training, which has enabled me to experience this service deeply and richly so that it has become an essential lifeline of joy, comfort and strength, a never-failing encounter with our Lord.

All this need not fade away as we return to the rush and hassle of life on Monday morning. Are we prepared and expectant to commune with our divine lover as we live our ordinary lives? Do we set aside a fixed time during the day to meet with him in scripture and prayer, and stick to it, no matter what else is happening? The prayer we bring to God at these times needs to be more than a shopping list of requests, or a cry for help, though these are valid. We need to be still and quiet and attentive to him as we would with anyone else we love deeply. Then we can truly commune with him and hear him speak to us. Here are some words which will enable us to do that for a moment right now: -

be silent  
be still  
alone empty  
before your God  
say nothing  
ask nothing  
be silent  
be still  
let your God  
look upon you  
that is all  
He knows  
He understands  
He loves you with  
an enormous love  
He only wants to  
look upon you  
with his love  
quiet  
still  
be Amen.