

Sermon: Marriage; Jesus is coming for His bride

Reading: Matthew 18:15-20

Introduction

Have you noticed as we go through life, the celebrations change. When I was younger many of my friends were making vows before God as they promised to love and cherish each other in holy matrimony. We celebrated and rejoiced with them and danced at their weddings.

Then as the years rolled on the invitations were now for services of thanksgivings for their children. The vows made in church to honour each other, now extended to their children, with a commitment to bring them up in the ways of Christ. It is a joyous cycle of celebrations which has the hand of God's blessing upon it for the family and the church.

As a minister one of the joys which delights my heart is when a person requests baptism, recognising Jesus as their Lord and Saviour for themselves and the desire to commit their lives to Jesus in a public act of worship.

Sadly in the UK, weddings and baptisms have decreased significantly in recent years. Culture no longer cherishes or values these rites in the same way our forefathers/mothers once did. Unfortunately popular opinion in society is having an adverse effect on the Christian church. The structure and shape of family has changed dramatically and become unrecognisable from a Scriptural perspective.

Traditional marriages are in decline, civil partnerships both for same sex couples and heterosexual couples are offering alternatives to the traditional biblical view of marriage. No fault and quick divorces have been the latest changes to be added to the statute books undermining the value and uniqueness of marriage.

The impact of all these changes will impact generations to come. Already we see a cynicism towards marriage as couples prefer to live together without making commitments before God and sealing their relationships in marriage. This is such a sensitive topic, Christians have wrestled with these issues and in many cases reluctantly accepted the ways of popular culture and largely given up the fight in a compromise to maintain peace in the home and within the church.

So what has all this got to do with our reading today? Marriage in Scripture is far more than simply bringing together a couple in union but points to something remarkable. To remind ourselves of God's intention for marriage and consider the symbolism and imagery as it points to something spectacular.

Did you know marriage is a love story where God is preparing a bride for His Son? In God's great story of redemption He is preparing a bride for His Son.

Consider the imagery of bride in Scripture when relating to Jesus as it refers to His bride as the church. Jesus is so in love with His bride, He gave up His very life for her, to redeem her for Himself. The symbolism and imagery of marriage is intended to point towards the love God has for His people and towards the day when Jesus returns for His bride.

Unfortunately changes to marriage and the importance of marriage has been undermined and changed, distorted from God's original intention that the redesign of marriage alters the symbolism and imagery it once portrayed.

In the beginning

Turn with me to the book of Genesis chapter 2 and we discover God was the one who set out the definition and boundaries of marriage. God instituted the bond between the man and the woman, saying the two shall become one flesh. He made them male and female, which sets out the pattern of union. Many will object to this in our culture today but we can't change the Scriptures which reinforces this pattern by emphasising the person will leave their father and mother defining the roles within the relationship. 'The man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh' (**Gen 2:24; Matt 19:5; Eph 5:31**),

Marriage is unique

The ceremony of holy matrimony is a sacred and holy matter. Vows and promises are made to each other before God, family and friends and before a minister of God. And how we enjoy the celebration with feasting, music and dancing.

The promises which are made on the wedding day are intended to offer security. No matter what comes along to shake the marriage, together they unite, for richer, for poorer for better, for worse, in sickness and in health, until death do they part. The assurance of the promises made to one another, to never leave nor abandon the other, but will cherish and honour each other until the last dying breath! This is what makes the wedding so special. Consider this in relation to God's commitment to His Church.

In the same way God is committing Himself to His bride and He will never leave her, forsake her, abandon her or divorce her. His commitment is true, steadfast and certain (**See Matt 28 and Eph 5:25**). Marriage is the pattern which reminds us to what God is pointing towards, the great day of celebration when our Lord Jesus returns for His Church in celebration and great joy, when His people will enter the banqueting halls of heaven for all eternity, to be loved and cherished always.

It's not a perfect world

Most people who are married or have been married will know from experience that marriages can't survive on feelings and emotions alone. Paul uses three words when speaking about commitment - faith, hope and love and of the three love being the greater. The love Paul refers to is sacrificial, costly, strong, enduring, patient and kind, keeping no record of wrongs, not boastful or proud and certainly not arrogant or self seeking but protects, trusts and always hopes. Love is much more than feelings alone. (**see 1 Cor 13**).

Sadly not all marriages can take the pressure which comes in life and in an imperfect world marriages can break down, even in Christian marriages. Such is the bond of union God intended, that it's incredibly painful when a marriage breaks down, the scars remain deep. Marriage is more than a physical union it's also deeply spiritual. Divorce has always been a sensitive issue, so much so Jesus was asked the question about divorce. Jesus replies, Have you not read the Scriptures (**Matt 19**). There are three biblical reasons for divorce, however I will cover these in another sermon.

Jesus return

The betrothal was a time of separation where the groom would leave the bride to be with her family to go and prepare the place for his bride. When all was ready the groom would return for his bride and take her to be with him. Does this sound familiar? Read John chapter 14 and be inspired!

The bride for her part is to be ready for his return, remaining watchful in eager anticipation and above all to remain faithful to Him (**2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:24**). So the imagery of betrothal and marriage is an exciting one to hold on to as Christians.

For on that great day there will be the great sound of the trumpet blast and the people of God will be caught up in the clouds to meet Her Lord in the air (**1 Thes 4:17**). O what joy to meet our Lord on the day of rapture.

Faithful and faithless bride

An important question to ask ourselves in this generation is this, 'Are we being the faithful or faithless bride of Christ? Are we flirting with the world and prostituting ourselves by chasing after other lovers in order to be popular, or are we keeping ourselves pure for Him? Think about it, what groom wants to return to unite with a bride who is.....

Half committed

Chasing other lovers

A bride who is luke warm, neither hot nor cold, indifferent!

A bride who is not faithful.

The groom returns for a bride who is faithful, loves him and is eagerly waiting for the betrothal period to end so she can be united with her great love. The Christian gospel is not a half way house of a civil partnership or redefined marriage to include what ever we want, neither will the words quick and easy divorce ever come to mind.

If you are not convinced the Scriptures speak of marriage in this way as a relationship with God then turn to the book of Hosea! Here we discover the heart of God is breaking over the unfaithfulness of His people and how they have prostituted themselves with other lovers, giving their hearts, affections and love to others. Jeremiah records these words, "Does a bride forget her wedding ornaments? Yet my people have forgotten me, days without number (**Jer 2:32**). Faithfulness and unfaithfulness is the theme throughout Scriptures. So as a church the question of our faithfulness to Him and His word is an important one.

Church discipline

The imagery and symbolism of marriage in Scripture is pointing to an event with great significance. Jesus is the one who came to build His Church (not bricks and mortar) but a people, holy and faithful unto Him alone. The Church is His, He is the Head, not us, so we would do well to heed what He instructs His Church, 'If you love me you will obey my commands says Jesus. We must be Church His way, 'Unless the Lord builds the house the labourers labour in vain' (Ps 127:1).

Jesus is aware that within the body of Christ there will be disagreements and fall outs, but these should be resolved quickly. He has provided a process for us to work within His Church sensitively for resolving issues within the body of Christ.

As our reading shows, we see a three fold process which is to be followed for reconciliation or before discipline is enforced. The process begins lightly where the aggrieved will take their concern to their brother/sister and provide them with an opportunity to see what they are doing is wrong.

The first stage is private, between the two people concerned, this minimises the risk of escalating a situation.

However if the relationship and issue is not restored then a witness is to be taken along. Preferably a trusted elder, a wise steward of the church, who can act as a mediator and a

witness to what has been said. Finally if the first two stages yields no fruit, the matter is to be brought before the church, and if the sinner doesn't repent and come back in line with church doctrine, governance or order, then discipline is the final straw, read again what Jesus says. This is challenging indeed in our seeker sensitive, cultural embracing all inclusive churches. Paul provides an example of this with a believer who was acting sexually immoral within the congregation (1 Cor 5).

Jesus offers us wise guidance, recognising disagreements will occur in the church, so provides His people with a loving process to follow. Although churches may have disciplinary processes in place, its crucial we employ the process biblically and don't simply ignore wrong behaviour in the church. We must start in the right place otherwise we are going to end up in the wrong place as we journey on this road. The Scriptures offer us much when it comes to discipline in the church. **(See Matthew 18: 15-18; 1 Cor 5; 2 John and 2 Peter)** as well as the book of Jude.

Summary

The Baptist theologian John L Dagg said, 'When discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it'. The Holy Spirit will not dwell in a house which is divided against itself, for it will simply fall **(See Matt 12:22-28)**.

The church is the body of Christ and we are to honour Him. The church is triumphant as Jesus says, not even the gates of hell can prevail against her and Jesus is returning for His bride. **(see Matt 16:18). (2 Cor 11:2; Tit 2:13; John 14:3; 1 Thes 4:14)**. Such is the love of God for his people, the book of Romans tells us nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. The marriage metaphor and imagery is a powerful one and when rightly understood provides us as Christians with a great hope in our great Saviour Jesus Christ.

When Jesus returns He is coming for His bride the church and for her part (our part) she is to be ready, keeping His word, remaining faithful to Him, and eagerly awaiting His return. John 'Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready' **(Rev 19:7)**. May we be faithful in all we do for His glory and make sure we have enough oil in our lamps so as the groom is delayed we will be found ready when the trumpet blast sounds. Let us be ready, not asleep and certainly not unfaithful so that we may enjoy the great banquet of celebration in the Kings house. **Amen**