

**Sermon, Sunday 24th January 2021, by Andrew Watts, Lay Minister
Revelation, chap 19, v. 6 – 10, John, chap 2, v. 1-11.**

I will speak first about our gospel reading from John chapter 2, and then we will move on to the epistle reading from Revelation.

I suggest we begin by each remembering a wedding that we have attended. It might be your own, or the wedding of a particular friend or family member. I don't just mean attending the wedding service. I am encouraging you to remember what happened afterwards: going in to the wedding reception, the table decorations, the food and drink, the speeches, entertainment, perhaps the dancing in the evening. Jewish weddings in Bible times lasted several days. I admit that I have regretted that we have not taken on that tradition.

In our gospel reading, was it significant that this first act of Jesus's ministry took place at a wedding? It sounds as though Jesus, his mother and some disciples (who we discovered last week had recently been chosen), had simply accepted an invitation that came from a village not far from Nazareth. Of course they went: weren't weddings occasions when villagers could have a party? Certainly there were no celebrations for birthdays or holidays, but weddings were times when poor communities could rejoice together.

Jesus was not expecting anything special to happen. Then, perhaps because of his mother's words, may be He realised that this was an opportunity. Or did God the Father prompt Him that this was the time to begin announcing his message. So ordinary water, used according to the religious law for washing, was transformed into the wine of celebration and gladness.

It is clear that people in New Testament times regarded a wedding as a time for celebration. Later when Jesus' disciples were accused of not fasting as the disciples of John the Baptist did, Jesus used an image from a wedding in his reply. He said that when the bridegroom is with his friends then is the time, not for self-denial and restraint, but for joy and

exuberance (Mark 2 v.19). If you type 'Jewish Wedding' into YouTube you get several films taken at Jewish weddings which show the determination of the guests to give the bride and groom a good send off, with lots of dancing, raucous singing and humour. A wedding in New Testament times was an opportunity for celebration, even in communities which generally had to survive on very little. The Master of the wedding banquet, which we read about this morning, comments that the usual procedure was to serve the best wine first and then, when presumably people were less discriminating, they might bring out the ordinary plonk.

So why would a wedding be a cause for an explosion of rejoicing? And why might guests feel that it was expected of them to let their hair down and sing and dance? If we are talking about religious Jews, what might lead them to believe that God expected them to celebrate? I could suggest two reasons.

Firstly, the formation of a couple was seen as something new and promising, almost as though the couple would, together, offer something special to their community. When Jesus talked about marriage, He went back to the book of Genesis and described the situation of a couple being made from two individuals as an act of divine creation (Mark 10 v. 9). He believed that it was God Himself who was bringing the couple together. In the society of Jesus' day it was expected that once people became adult they would get married. Some Rabbis taught that men should consider getting married at the age of eighteen. Of course it was accepted that there was a ministry for unmarried people so that they could give themselves wholly to their work and to God's service. That must have applied to Jesus himself. Also in the first letter to the Corinthians, we know that the Apostle Paul made a point of saying that he was not married.

A second reason for a big celebration when a couple got married was that their union offered the possibility and hope of new children coming into the world. Jewish families would expect to have several children. And of course each child that is born offers for everyone an example of

the wonderful variety of creation and new possibilities. Who knows what they might grow up to be and to do in years to come?

There were three stages to a Jewish wedding. First there was the betrothal. This was when a wedding was formally agreed by the two families, and preparations were got underway to enable the couple to live together. Then, after about a year, came the day when the bride was to leave her parents' home. The bridegroom and his friends would arrive at the bride's family house and she and the bridesmaids would emerge in their special clothes. Together they would all process with music and singing. (By the way, while preparing this I discovered that in traditional families in both India and China this is still what is done.) The procession would take place after the heat of the day: in Jesus's parable (Matthew 25 v. 1-13) the bridegroom is delayed and doesn't get to the bride until midnight. But we can imagine the procession through the darkened streets lit by oil-lamps, their arrival at the bridegroom's parents' home and then the celebrations getting under way.

It seems an extraordinary leap in our lectionary that we have heard in today's gospel about a marriage in this life, but in our reading from the book of Revelation we are given a vision of the next life. The image in that reading was of the guests at a wedding celebration. "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19 v. 19). We remember from last week that the Lamb in heaven was a symbol of Jesus Himself. But what does the next life have to do for us with marriage?

Jesus was asked that question by a group of people who did not believe in a resurrection, and this is how He answered them:

"The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age, and in the resurrection of the dead, will neither marry nor be given in marriage ... They are God's children since they are children of the resurrection" (Luke 20 v. 34-35).

It is as though Jesus saw the journey from this life as a way of humans returning to their original home. As though, like the bride who grew up in

her parents' home, we are only temporarily here. In the light of what we have thought about today this reminds us of the supporters of the groom and the bride meeting for a procession of celebration. They joined together for a night walk through the streets, with the light of oil lamps.

The book of Revelation (chap 21) explains what will happen like this: "Now the dwelling of God is with humankind, and He will live with them and be their God ... for the old order of things has passed away." We can't know, or even imagine, what it might be like to enter the life beyond this one. But one thing we can be sure of is that God will be with us on that final journey.

I heard an extraordinary story from a cousin of mine who told me of the death of his grandmother. She was elderly and frail and at last slipped into a coma. Family members took some time out of her room, leaving her in the care of a nurse. During that period the old lady seemed to wake up, and she said "Jesus has called me. I must go." It was as though the way she had explained her faith to herself in her life, was carrying her through that last experience. Then she slipped into the final stage of her coma from which she died.

When Jesus was talking to his disciples at their last supper together, He said: "In my Father's house are many rooms ... 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" (John 14 v. 2-3). Can we hear in that an echo of the procession in which a bride is invited to come and join the bridegroom's family?

The next person to whom this was said, literally on the day of his death, was described as 'a bandit', and he died on a cross beside Jesus. Jesus said to him, 'Today ... you will be with me ... in paradise' (Luke 23 v. 43).
Amen.