

Epiphany 3 (24th January 2021)

9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton	Genesis 14 vv 17-20 p15 Revelation 19 vv 6-10
11.00 Holy Communion Halling	p1247 John 2 vv 1-11 p1064

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities stretch forth thy right hand to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

Psalm 128: **BLESSED** are all they that fear the Lord : and walk in his ways.2. For thou shalt eat the labours of thine hands : O well is thee, and happy shalt thou be.3. Thy wife shall be as the fruitful vine : upon the walls of thine house.4. Thy children like the olive-branches : round about thy table.5. Lo, thus shall the man be blessed : that feareth the Lord. 6. The Lord from out of Sion shall so bless thee : that thou shalt see Jerusalem in prosperity all thy life long.7. Yea, that thou shalt see thy children's children : and peace upon Israel.

I can only think of one verse in the bible which comes anywhere close to describing a wedding. That verse is Genesis 24⁶⁷. Today's Gospel reading is about how Jesus and His disciples were invited as guests to a marriage feast, and what He did while He was there and what what Jesus did at the marriage feast shows us about Him. But nowhere in the bible are we told anything about a marriage ceremony or ritual. We're not told anything about rings or holding hands, the things we expect in a Christian marriage, or about signing a contract under the wedding canopy and ceremonially breaking a glass and the giving of a ring to the bride, as we would expect in a modern Jewish wedding. We're not told anything about vows, blessings or special wedding prayers. The closest we get to a description of a wedding in the bible is Genesis 24⁶⁷. It is well worth reading the whole of chapter, though I shan't this morning. It's a great story. Abraham and Sarah had taken up residence in Canaan. God had told them to leave first Ur and then Haran. They were to enjoy a new relationship with Him, free of the pagan pollution of the city. God promised the land of Canaan to Abraham and his seed forever. Although at the time childless and well stricken in years, Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness. In due course, the child of the promise was born, Abraham's son Isaac. When Isaac was grown up and Sarah was dead, Abraham applied himself to the question of a bride for his son. He didn't want Isaac to marry any of the pagans who lived in the land of Canaan. Abraham and his people had come to the Promised Land in order to devote themselves entirely to the LORD, to the one true God, and to be done with idols and images. Neither, however, did he want Isaac to return to Haran, the place God had told him to leave in order to make this fresh start in Canaan. So Abraham summoned his faithful old steward Eliezer and sent him to Haran to find a suitable bride for Isaac and to bring her back, so long as she was willing, to the land of Canaan to become Isaac's wife. It's important to note that none of this could happen unless the girl was willing. It was an arranged marriage, but not a forced marriage. The consent of both parties is always required if a marriage is to be valid. It is true now and it was true 3,000 years ago. Anyway, after a long story, Eliezer met a beautiful, hard working and kind hearted young virgin named Rebekah. Rebekah was excited at the prospect of marriage to Isaac and returned eagerly with Eliezer to the land of Canaan. When they were nearly home, Rebekah spied Isaac across the field where he was quietly meditating. It was love at first sight and the last verse of the chapter simply states: *And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.* It was as simple as that. Isaac took his bride home. He loved her. She became his wife. I sometimes tell this story to young couples who are feeling under a lot of pressure to make sure that an elaborate and expensive ceremony goes exactly according to plan. Even today, you just need two people to take one another as man and wife, sincerely pledging their love to one another in the vows of the marriage service, one or two rings, two witnesses, a blessing and some prayers, and to sign the registers for the satisfaction of the secular state. It appears that the some couples are discovering in the COVID crisis that what really matters about a wedding is as simple as it is profound.

The Bible, then, says almost nothing about wedding ceremonies, but marriage itself is of the greatest importance in the pages of Scripture, reflecting its key part in God's plan for Creation. God creates us male

and female in His own image, His image being love. The very first commandment is to go forth and multiply. Eve is created because *it is not good that the man should be alone*. We need one another. We need love. We love our husbands or wives. We love our parents and our children and other family members. We love our friends. Indeed, if we keep God's commandments, we love our neighbours as ourselves. If we observe the teaching of Jesus, we love our fellow Christians as Christ loves us. Is that different from *loving our neighbours as ourselves*? I'm not sure.

Marriage isn't for everyone and romantic love isn't the only kind of love. For the majority probably, marriage is their vocation, but for others the single state may be their calling. This is a sensitive issue. Some churches are so keen on the married state that they treat single people as if they were somehow lacking in their lives and must be found partners, and some other churches too quickly dismiss the desire of many single people to find someone to marry, and tell them to embrace celibacy as a gift from God, when it may not be in any particular case.

We all, however, need love. God is love and we can always depend on Him to love us. We also all need someone to love. God welcomes our love. God is all we need, but, if we truly love God, we'll love other people too. We'll even love the unlovely as He loves the unlovely.

From the very beginning of Creation, marriage is a lifelong relationship of unconditional love. Being fallible human beings, none of us attains perfection in our relationships. No marriage is perfect. Some sadly go badly wrong. As Paul says, (I Corinthians 13) ⁴ *Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,* ⁵ *Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;* ⁶ *Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;* ⁷ *Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.* Using the traditional "charity" rather than the word "love" used in most modern translations reminds us that Paul is not talking particularly about married love here. He is talking about the love which should characterise all our relationships as Christians. Love (or charity) like this would bring us through us through all the trials and temptations which beset our necessarily imperfect human relationships. We do sometimes fail, not because love can ever fail, but because our human love is imperfect. So we pray for God's grace and carry on the best we can, relying on God to support us however things work out.

Marriage, as a relationship of all-consuming, totally fulfilling, unconditional love, signifies the relationship between the believer and God, between Christ and His Church. God in Christ loves us for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health, but we shall not be parted from Him even in death. God in Christ makes these promises to us as a bridegroom makes these promises to his bride. Our response, as Christians, is to love Him back in the same way, to make the same promises to love Him - for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health, never to be parted from Him, even by death. God makes the couple one. *Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder.* In the same way, when we are baptised in His Name, we become one with Christ and He with us. Nothing *can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

So, in our reading from Revelation, we see that the final consummation, the coming of the Kingdom of God, His eternal victory over sin, the world and the devil, is signified as the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, when the Church of God is presented to Christ the Bridegroom, in fine white linen wedding garments, the righteousness of the saints, supplied by the Lord Himself through His self-sacrificial love on the Cross of Calvary.

His turning water into wine at the Wedding Feast at Cana in Galilee is the beginning of the miracles which show Who Jesus is, the One in Whom all our needs are met, all our hopes fulfilled, the One with Whom we shall dwell eternally in a perfect union of love, not because it is what we deserve, but solely because He loves us and gives Himself for us.