

Pentecost 4, Proper 9, Year , 2014
"A Royal Wedding Song"
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Chris Appleby

I love weddings. Don't you love weddings? Of all the pastoral offices I perform they're my favourite. Funerals are always sad, sometimes extremely sad. Baptisms are generally happy occasions. I mean everyone loves a baby don't they? But weddings are the best. Everyone is so happy. The groom and his friends always brush up so nicely, no matter how scruffy they look on a normal day; the bride comes in wearing some romantic confection of a dress and there's love overflowing. It's just great!

Well the psalm we're looking at today is written for just such an occasion. The original setting was most probably the wedding of the King of Israel to a young bride, possibly from another country.

As you would expect of a king, the groom is a heartthrob.

You are the most handsome of men;
grace is poured upon your lips;
therefore God has blessed you forever.

He's good- looking and gracious of speech. Just the sort of man you want to lead your country. And he's a mighty warrior. The writer urges him to put on his sword, to ride out victoriously for the cause of truth and to defend the right. It sounds like Superman doesn't it? "Truth, Justice and the American Way!" This might be a good weekend for you to reflect on whether this is still the American way. In Australia we sometimes look on and wonder whether freedom here has taken the place of justice in that formula. But that's not a question for me - it's for you.

This king is on about truth and justice. His role is to defend the right and to take down the king's enemies, that is, those who are unjust, who oppose God's purposes in the world.

The writer reminds the king just whose throne it is that he sits upon. It's God's throne, a throne that will endure forever. Because the king loves righteousness and hates wickedness God has anointed him to take the highest position in the land, to sit on God's throne, in his place.

Then we get the commentator's observation. This is like the red carpet at the Oscars. He's sitting on the sidelines reporting what he sees and smells and hears: the king's robes are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia, an orchestra is playing in the background, the palace is decked out with ivory decorations, princesses make up the royal retinue.

And then we come to the bride. The queen stands beside him decked in gold of Ophir and in gold-woven robes. That is, gold from Solomon's goldmines, on her wrists, around her neck and woven into her robes, indicating how precious she is in the king's sight.

But wait, all is not perfect. You can imagine the young queen surrounded by all this splendour, being perhaps a little overwhelmed, perhaps a little nervous. She's far from home, she's about to marry this great king and she's a bit homesick. So the singer gives her a special message. He says

Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear;
forget your people and your father's house,
and the king will desire your beauty. (vv. 10-11)

The time has come for her to leave her parents' home, perhaps to leave her own country and be joined with this man in a lifelong union. So she's exhorted to forget where she's come from and look forward to this new position; to see the benefits that come from marrying a king:

the people of Tyre will seek your favor with gifts,
the richest of the people with all kinds of wealth. (vv. 12-13)

Her new status comes with great privileges. People will be vying for her attention; plying her with gifts.

We've had the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, with their son George, visiting Australia this year and of course people flocked to see them, especially George, and everywhere they went people gave them gifts. It's what you do when someone that important comes to visit.

And so it will be with this queen. In fact already she's experiencing the benefits:

The princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven robes;
in many-colored robes she is led to the king;
behind her the virgins, her companions, follow. (vv.13-14)

There's a feeling of opulence and prosperity about the scene as she comes to be married to the king.

Finally the singer announces a blessing:

In the place of ancestors you, O king, shall have sons;
you will make them princes in all the earth.
I will cause your name to be celebrated in all generations;
therefore the peoples will praise you forever and ever. (vv.16-17)

The result of their union will be sons as a heritage, to perpetuate his name in all the earth, to continue his rule in years to come.

It's a great picture isn't it? Except that as we read through the history of Israel we find that time and time again a good king is followed by a disappointing son who fails to maintain his rule in justice and truth and several generations have to pass before another good king appears.

But still it's an encouraging psalm if you're thinking about weddings. But what do we do with it if we're not planning a wedding? Why has God put this in his Word, preserved it for us in our Scriptures?

Well, did you know that this psalm is quoted in the first chapter of Hebrews? As the writer to the Hebrews begins his exposition of the identity of Jesus as the Son of God he says this:

But of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions. (Heb 1:8-9)

The writer looks back at this psalm and realises that these words apply to Jesus. Jesus is the true king of Israel, the one who truly loves righteousness and hates wickedness, whose throne is forever and ever; who doesn't need to rely on sons to continue his rule, because he lives forever. Jesus has overcome his enemies by dying on the cross and rising again to eternal life. And he's now seated at the right hand of God having been given a name that's above every name.

But let me ask, if this psalm is about Jesus then who is the bride?

I hope you answered that the Church is the bride of Christ? At least that's what we read in Ephesians 5 where Paul talks about how husbands and wives are to relate to each other. He says that the husband must love the wife the way Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her. So if the bride is the Church, that is, you and me, what can we learn from this psalm about how we're to live?

I guess the best part is that if we're joined to Christ like a wife to a husband then we're the recipients of an incredible blessing. We now bear a royal name. We are sons and daughters of the king, of God himself. We're joined with Christ by the presence of his Holy Spirit within us, which means that we not only bear his name but we bear his image within us, we experience his power in our lives, we can communicate with him one to one.

But there's more to it than just the privilege of being joined with God. There's also a responsibility. Can you see what it is?

What was the warning given to the young queen?

Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear;
forget your people and your father's house.(v.10)

This is the difficult bit. If we're joined with Christ, if we've come into his kingdom, we need to distance ourselves from our old world. On Friday or last night, I daresay, you all joined together to celebrate your Independence Day. It's a day well worth celebrating; a day when your forebears finally threw off the shackles of a foreign ruler. We haven't quite got there in Australia yet, though the foreign rule is purely ceremonial these days. But when you gained independence it meant no longer following the rules of the English king and parliaments. You had to create a whole new way of ruling yourselves. If anyone at that stage had suggested doing what the King of England commanded they would have been thrown out as a traitor.

Well we're in the same situation. We've thrown off the rule of the prince of this world and accepted that of God the Father and Jesus Christ his anointed king.

But we still live in this world with its competing demands, with its different morality, with its evangelists of moral weakness speaking loud and clear. It's very difficult to forget the old ways when they're being thrust in our faces and our ears every day in hundreds of different ways. But that's what's expected of us. Turn away from the standards of the world around you and make yourself truly a citizen of heaven. Become like your king, loving truth and justice and God's way, opposing the forces of wickedness in the world.

And finally, notice that the end of the psalm applies to us as well. God's desire for us is that we'll bear offspring in his name; not physical offspring, though if you're a young married couple that would be appropriate; no, spiritual offspring. He wants us to bring many sons and daughters into his kingdom so that his name will be celebrated in all generations.

I wonder how you are at telling people about your faith. This seems like a good church to belong to. Is it good enough that you'd feel OK inviting a friend to join you here? This is one of the challenges I've been putting to my congregation lately. We have a great church with a great atmosphere on a Sunday morning, but I think people are scared to invite their friends. They don't want to risk being embarrassed or having their friends say no.

But you never know what they'll say unless you ask. In fact you may discover that they've just been waiting to be invited. It's hard to go to a church by yourself for the first time. It's much easier if you come with a friend isn't it?

God wants us to raise up new members for his family. If we do that then truly the peoples will praise God forever and ever.