

Sermon Epiphany 3 – Wedding Guests
Genesis 14 vv 17-20, Revelation 19 vv 6-10, John 2 vv 1-11

It is always an honour to be invited to a wedding. Marriage is a very special occasion in which two people promise to love one another in the way that God loves us – unconditionally and forever. Now Jesus tells us that His Commandment to all of us is that we should love one another as He loves us. When you think about it, that is a truly amazing commandment, since He loved us to the point of giving His life for us, but it is what we aspire to in the Church and also what we aspire to, with perhaps a little more success, in Holy Matrimony.

A wedding day is a very special day in the life of the bride and groom and it is also a special day for their families and for their true friends. Man and woman are to be united in love and they want all the people they love to be there and to share in their union. It is a great honour to be invited and one of the problems of planning a wedding is, of course, how to decide whom to invite. Financial resources limit the numbers and people one would like to invite may have to be left off the list. On the other hand, there may be people one feels one has to invite even though they are not particularly loveable. Maybe such people have a special status as being invited because they should be there, even though it is not expected that they will contribute to the party atmosphere. There is also the difficulty that some of the people you desperately want to be there may not get on with one another at all well.

A lot of trouble goes into arranging a wedding: the bride's dress, the reception venue, food, drink, music, not to mention the actual service in church. It is reasonable to expect the guests to be sensible of the honour being done to them: to respond to invitations promptly, not to fail to turn up having accepted, to dress appropriately smartly, perhaps to bring a present and to behave themselves.

The wedding day should be a very happy day for everybody. The words couples say to one another before God and the congregation must be among the most sublime that any human being can utter to any other. *To have and to hold from this day forward; for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish till death us do part. All that I am I give to you, and all that I have I share with you, within the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.* Such words can only be exceeded by the words we utter to God when we say things like, *Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your Name*, when we acknowledge Jesus as Lord or when we cry out *Halleluiah!*

After the service, the drive to the reception, perhaps in some special conveyance, then food and drink, music and dancing in a venue as attractive as we can make it.

It should be a very happy day and usually it is. The things that sometimes spoil it are nerves – though these are not usually too much of a problem unless people have become obsessed with the practical details and lost sight of what the ceremony is really all about; disappointments regarding dresses, cars, flowers etc - though to say that problems with those sort of things have actually ruined someone's wedding day again suggests that she or he has missed the point; a shortage of food or drink as in today's Gospel – though that it is hardly ever a problem in our affluent society; guests misbehaving, being rude to one another,

getting drunk, perhaps even a punch up. This last can really spoil the occasion for the couple and for everyone else and it is absolutely disgraceful behaviour on the part of guests who have received the honour of being invited to someone's big day.

There is a lot about weddings and banquets in the Bible as an illustration of the relationship between God and His people and to give us an idea of what Heaven might be like.

Some texts compare the love of the believer for God with the love of two young lovers. We can be that passionate about God. Some passages portray a marriage between God and His people, between Christ and His Church. Christ has provided us with the pure, white marriage garment, the forgiveness of our sins. We are washed clean in the Blood of the Lamb. Just as husband and wife become one flesh, so does the believer become one with Christ. To that extent, Baptism is like Matrimony. We are united with Christ.

For the believer to be unfaithful to God it is much the same as if a man is unfaithful to his wife or a woman to her husband. The sin of apostasy is the sin of adultery writ large. Infidelity to God is infinitely worse than infidelity to a spouse. There is plenty of material in the Bible about how God is hurt and angry because of the faithlessness of His people, but how He longs for them to come back because He is always faithful and longs to forgive and to start the relationship again.

In other texts, we are regarded not so much as the bride, but as the guests at the wedding. An abundance of good food and drink, beautiful music and sharing all this with family and friends is a sign of the Kingdom of God, of what life could be like on earth, of what it will be like in Heaven. The marriage feast of the Lamb stands as pledge of what God promises His faithful ones. The metaphor shifts. We are both the bride and the guests, but that is OK. Dreams and visions do not have to be literal. In Christ, we enjoy the blessings both of the bride and of the guests.

The Holy Communion itself is part of that long-running strand in the Bible, from Melchizedek offering Abraham bread and wine in Genesis right through to the final consummation in Revelation, which links the blessings of food and drink, of hospitality and table fellowship, of marriage and sacrifice, with God's union and communion with His people and the blessings and warnings inextricably mixed up in any authentic encounter with the living God.

The marriage of the King's Son is an incredibly desirable occasion to go to. Those who were not sensible of the honour, those who despised the invitations, well, we know what happened to them. They abused the King's messengers and the King sent his soldiers to deal with them. We know that the King threw the banquet open to everyone, but it was still an honour. The fact that anyone could go did not mean it was cheap. The guest who turned up without a wedding garment was cast out into outer darkness.

St Paul warned that those who eat and drink unworthily, eat and drink their own damnation. What is their offence? To fail to discern the Lord's Body. In context, this appears to mean failing to recognise that the Church is Christ's Body, splitting up the Church into factions, not caring about the needs of other people, helping yourself first.

It is an enormous privilege to be invited to God's Wedding Feast and actually going is sublime. It is an invitation open to everyone. There is nothing you have to do to qualify. The invitation is there for anyone to pick up. That does not mean it is valueless. On the contrary, it is priceless. Don't despise the invitation by failing to turn up. That dishonours the One Who graciously invited you. Don't turn up without a wedding garment. That would show you didn't think much of the Bridegroom. Wedding garments are freely available. You only have to confess your sins and you are washed clean and robed in white. And don't abuse the King by looking down on the other guests He has invited. Despising the King's guests is an insult to the King. We owe that much to Him, that we eat His food and drink His wine in harmony with the other guests. There aren't any punch ups in Heaven. So the pugnacious won't make it unless they repent. We are all invited to the wedding on the same basis, that Jesus loves us. The least we can do is to love one another.

The things that can go wrong with human weddings are indications of what can go wrong between us and God, but human marriage, as it is meant to be, is a true reflection of the relationship God offers us with Himself – an eternal unity of love and bliss.