**Sermon:  Annscroft 24.01.2021: Epiphany 3:  End of Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**

Perhaps one of the most enjoyable duties of a Parish Priest is taking weddings, although I was always nervous about the Registrar bit - make one mistake in the entry in the record book of weddings and it is on the certificate for the rest of the couples’ lives.  A few of the weddings I have. taken have caused me some concern - I remember one where I asked the bride and groom what they wanted and the bride said “Mummy says..”  I tried to point out tactfully that it wasn’t Mummy who was getting married but to no avail.  But most weddings have been joyous occasions.  An interesting one was marrying a 16 year old.  I was convinced it was the right decision, but she was an orphan. Her grandmother was her guardian and not the nicest of people.  We went ahead knowing full well that if the grandmother had turned up at the wedding and forbidden it, I would have had no choice but to stop, otherwise the wedding would have been invalid.  She didn’t turn up!  Other notable weddings were marrying my brother and his wife - the heading in the local paper being “Brother carries brother” and marrying our son - the bride, Donna, looked absolutely stunning.  But, of course, the most notable wedding for me was our own.  Margaret and myself were overwhelmed by the support of so many and Annscroft church was packed.  Among other things, the reception was distinguished by our pageboy falling into the hotel pond.

Why go on like this about weddings.  As you will have guessed, both lessons are about weddings.  At the second Jesus was a guest - his mother may well have been related to the family as she seems to have had some responsibility - and at the first Jesus is the bridegroom - the marriage feast of the lamb.

Let's look briefly at both.  The wedding at Cana in Galilee.  Many people are troubled by the way Jesus addresses his mother as “Woman”.  In the Greek language of the time, it was not disrespectful - there is no good translation of the word “gunai”.  Some commentators suggest “Lady” but this is too formal and it is clear that Mary knew Jesus would do something.  To go back to the story, John records that this was the first of Jesus’ signs, that is miracles which have a deeper spiritual meaning.  And Jesus chooses an ordinary village home, probably belonging to not very wealthy people - remember,  the wine ran out. It is in this humble setting that Jesus shows his glory - not in the temple, in a grand house or palace, but in a village home at the marriage of an ordinary young man and his bride.  We may not think our homes are very important in the order of things, but Jesus graces them with his presence and love equally as much as a big house or important function - and I believe more so for God delights in the simple things of life.

The miracle was a sign, and I think the really important point of the story is that Jesus, changing the water which symbolises the traditional Jewish faith into wine, into something much more wonderful means he makes something new out anything that befalls us, both happy events and the devastating ones that can come our way.  When that happens, all we can do is put them into the hands of Jesus and trust that He will make something good, positive and lasting out of them. Jesus changes water, the old, into wine, the new.

Let’s look now at the lesson from the book Revelation. First, think for a moment of the sentence, “For the Lord our God reigns”. This was written at a time when Christians faced a savage persecution, many of them dying cruel deaths, many having homes and property confiscated, many put in prison. John himself was a sufferer of that persecution. And yet he could still write “The Lord our God reigns” And I believe this is a lesson for us particularly in the face of the present pandemic, “The Lord reigns”. God is in control.  After the praise comes the wedding of the lamb, the marriage of Jesus and his church.  We cannot possibly imagine what life is like after we die, what heaven is like, and so John uses the simplest and best way of describing it.  He gives us a picture of a marriage feast where we, as part of the church, are united completely and utterly with Jesus along with all who believe in Him.  Here, I must put in a quick word about those who are not members of any church or do not have much belief. I do believe that God loves everyone - even, dare I say, it, Donald Trump although he may hate some of the things he has done.  God will somehow or other, through the cross of Jesus, bring each person into his kingdom - but that’s another sermon.

Thinking of the church this Sunday - it is the end of the week of prayer for Christian Unity.  Sadly the dress of the church is not pure white - it is tattered as is our own dress.  But we have come a long way even in my lifetime towards unity.  When I was first ordained, things were very different - I couldn’t, or at least wasn’t supposed to, give communion to people of other churches.  Now many churches welcome each other to their services without conditions and do work together - we have such an example in Shrewsbury.  There is still a long way to go but we are getting there.  And the end is marriage with its feasting and joy.  We, with the whole church, are destined to be joined completely and utterly to the Lamb of God, Jesus our Lord and Saviour.

Written by Rev’d Colin Hurford