

Psalm 45 - Married to God

Who can tell me what happened on 16th November 2010?

It was 11.45 on 16th November 2010 when a spokesperson for Clarence house announced that Prince William is to marry Kate Middleton in 2011

The UK public are quite divided about the razzmatazz surrounding this wedding. There are some who can't get enough of it. People like David Cameron who apparently slept out on Pall Mall ahead of the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Di, One of my son Matthew's colleagues was over the moon when the wedding day was made a public holiday because she said she'd be taking a day off anyway to go and be there.

Twitter was abuzz with comments. Some were less than positive about the royal family, expressing resentment at the money spent on them. One tweet reported on BBC website criticised William's antics, using helicopters to take himself to Kate's family home. It concluded: "These people corrupt everything and everyone they touch. This country deserves better"

Of course fashion lovers are speculating what Kate will wear. One of the first off the mark was Peta Hunt, fashion director at You & Your Wedding magazine. She predicted Kate will wear: a demure, high necked, hand embroidered, lace couture gown....

The venue was discussed as well. On the day of the announcement BBC royal correspondent Peter Hunt , said: "It won't be any old back alley."

Like it or not the Royal wedding will attract huge publicity. It will inevitably be a wonderful spectacle followed by a sumptuous meal for those lucky enough to be invited. Hello magazine would give its right arm, if it has one, to gain exclusive photographic rights.

The cynical royal reporter in the Independent speculated this week that Prince Charles might push for a very green wedding, with guests asked to arrive in electric cars, but I doubt even Charles would actually go that far. Royal weddings will always be glorious and spectacular. And that is exactly what the Psalmist has in mind in Psalm 45

He tells us about the venue...the palace of the king

He tells us about the bride's dress...a gown interwoven with gold

We even hear about what the groom was wearing...fragrant robes and a sword at his side

And we know something about the music too – stringed instruments to make one glad

This psalm was probably written for King Solomon on the occasion of his wedding to an Egyptian princess. It's not an important point and John Goldingay suggests that it might well have been used regularly, either at annual celebrations of the King's birthday or wedding anniversary or at very least whenever an Israelite king was married.

Whatever the detail it's quite an occasion. Like royal watchers will be on April 29th the psalmist is quite excited: v1

Peterson translates this verse in The Message like this:

"My heart bursts its banks, spilling beauty and goodness. I pour it out in a poem to the king, shaping the river into words."

1. The King's wedding

It is worth remembering that at the outset Israel's desire for a King arose from a rebellious attitude towards God. The people of Israel weren't content to have God as their King. They wanted a human king just like everyone else, despite God's warning of what kings would require of them. But God allows them to have their way and then, remarkably, he uses this very desire to fulfill his own purposes through the institution of kingship.

In this psalm the writer pours out a mixture of his praise for what is perhaps an idealistic view of the King he sees and his prayer that the king might become what a godly king should be. And in the midst of his prayer and praise he makes prophetic statements, divine promises, about the eternal nature of God's throne and God's King.

The psalm divides into 3 sections: King(vv 1-9), Bride (vv10-15) and King again (vv16-17). The themes of prayer, praise and promise are woven through these sections and we're going to have a look at what the psalmist has to say under those themes.

(i) Praise

The writer begins with a hearty commendation of the king in v2. "You are the most excellent of men". Literal translations speak more of the physical attractions of the King – you are the handsomest of men says the ESV – and this would accord with the view at that time that the king would be good looking as well as of good character.

If this king is Solomon then similar good looks are found in his father David and half brother Absalom. But it was just at the point that King David came on the scene that we are warned God doesn't look on the outward appearance but on the heart.

It is also worth noting that when Isaiah looks forward to the coming of the Messiah in ch 53 he tells us that the servant King will have "no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him"

The NIV translation of "excellence" therefore focuses on more important qualities including gracious speech (v2), a love of righteousness and hatred of wickedness in v7

But when it comes to the practicalities of the wedding day the king is worthy of the best. We read of the fragrant clothing of the King (v8); the splendour of his ivory decorated palaces (also v8); and the wealth and glory and splendid clothing of his bride vv13-14).

The king is much praised but at the same time there is a sense in which the psalmist is also expressing his desire of what the King will be. It's like it is his prayer

(ii) Prayer

In v4 he sets out his desire for the King to triumph, to triumph in promoting truth, humility and righteousness. Those are values not often found in election manifestos but they are essential for God's king to fight for. All his power and energy should be expended on such things.

The prayer continues in v5 with a longing that the King be victorious over his enemies; that the nations acknowledge his kingship, a kingship based on truth righteousness and humility

The psalmist's prayer extends to the King's bride: v10 [READ -11]

The Psalmist is urging the royal bride to draw a clear line from her own family. He wants her to leave behind the allegiances and priorities of her birth family and to make a new family. This is not just a chauvinistic idea, tied to a patriarchal society, because the King is urged to do the same v16 [READ]. The king too should have a new orientation towards the future – to be a parent rather than a son.

Husband and wife are to make each other their first priority. Together they are to make their own family with their own values. And if I understand v9 correctly there is the idea of the bride ruling with the King. She is at his right hand; she is co-regent; she is to share in his rule – just as Eve was called to share in Adam’s rule over the created order in Genesis 2.

So when v11 recommends to the bride that she honour her husband the king we must put it in that context. There is an order within the marriage, but not a demeaning one. The king is to lead as first among equals. As an Andrew Strauss among England’s Ashes winning cricketers. And for Solomon’s bride there will be great blessing if she lives this way because as we see in v12, the people of Tyre will honour Solomon’s bride with a gift; and millionaires will come seeking her favour.

The Psalmist praises King and bride; he prays that they might both exercise their roles in a godly fashion and then thirdly he prophesies, or promises great things for the King & Queen.

(iii) Promise

We’ve seen the promise to the bride in v12. v 16 contains a promise of sons to carry on their name , but in vv6 & 17 we find some surprising comments [READ v6] [READ v17]

In v6 the King is addressed as “God”. For a culture with such high views of the one creator God these are puzzling words. Some commentators suggest changes to the text so it does not refer to the King as God. But I’m told the Hebrew is plain enough and there are other scriptures in which god is legitimately used to refer to others than God himself.

So to quote Michael Wilcock: “to speak of God’s viceroy, who occupies God’s throne in God’s city and represents God’s rule is not quite so startling as it may seem at first. But there is more to this than meets the eye”. This psalm is much more than a wedding song for an Israelite king. It is a picture of a divine wedding to come. Which brings us to my second point.

2. Divine wedding

The Psalmist wrote better than he knew when he wrote vv 6-7 [READ]

The writer to the Hebrews records that God uses these very words about his Son the Lord Jesus. He is the King of Kings and we, his church, are his bride. The whole NT pictures Christ’s relationship with his church as like a marriage between a man and a woman. And Jesus spoke often of the great wedding feast to which his disciples are invited.

So what are we to learn from these verses about being married to God, about being the bride of Christ? First of all let’s be clear

(i) Human kings/marriages fail

Israel’s kings never lived up to either the praise or the prayer. Even the best of them fell far short of this ideal and for centuries after the exile it looked as if God’s promise had also failed

That’s our experience too:

- Our leaders, both in government and in the church, let us down;
- Not everyone has a positive experience of marriage.
- Not everyone who wants to gets married.
- Some marriages are childless even when the desire for children is there.

If we think we can depend fully on human beings and human institutions we will always be disappointed. The Bible leads us to expect no more. Our world and all its institutions are fatally flawed by human sin. Relationships at best fail to satisfy and at worst cause great pain and distress. The hunger and longing that such failed relationships create are meant to lead us to the one who perfectly fulfils those longings, the perfect King to whom the Psalmist unwittingly points.

(ii) God's king/marriage will last forever

As the writer to the Hebrews makes clear, these vv ultimately point to God's own son, the Lord Jesus himself, the only one who can perfectly satisfy our longings. He is the only one who warrants the Psalmists praise and who truly fulfils both the prayer and the promise. The nations will truly praise him for ever and ever.

So how are we to enjoy him and what will it involve, being the bride of Christ, married to God?

Vv10-12 give us some clues. If Solomon's bride was indeed a princess of Egypt she would have had to leave behind her old religion and all its practices and influence on her life. So it is with someone uniting with Christ the King. We now belong exclusively to Christ.

Being married to Christ is about changing one's allegiance from the values of the kingdom of this world, the one into which we were born, to the values of God's kingdom. This week we watched "The sinking of the Laconia", a true story from the 2nd WW. In it a German woman effectively changes her allegiance from Germany to Britain because of her disillusionment with the Third Reich.

Hilda Smith had a British father which made it easier but in doing so she burnt her German passport, she adopted the English language, she took the side of the British war effort and right at the end when she has a choice to escape to safety in a German U-boat by claiming her rights as a German citizen or be set adrift in the Atlantic with the Brits with little hope of survival she chooses to identify herself as British.

That's what it means to be married to God. We identify fully with his values, with his people, whatever the cost. We belong to him, our allegiance is to him and we honour him in all things so the old ways must go. My money is to become his, my time is to become his, my priorities are to become his, my ambitions are to become his. I no longer live for myself but for him. In the words of v11 we are to honour him because he is our Lord.

So being married to God means leaving behind the old way of life but it also means adopting a new way of life. A way of life that involves sharing in the Kings's rule

(iii) The King's bride shares in his rule (v9)

The bride is at the King's right hand. That's a place of authority, of influence, of honour. She will share with him in his reign. The NT picks up the idea in several places, spelling out that God's church, his bride will reign with him for ever. That's not a new idea of course. Adam and Eve were meant to rule over the earth from the beginning but their sin caused that to get completely messed up. But now, at the right hand of the King, as his bride we will share with

him in his rule; he gives us a part to play in his kingdom. Of course we do this on his terms; in his way:

He expects us to emulate his character, to pursue truth, humility and righteousness; we are to seek his honour and glory among the nations v5 [READ]. We are to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to our family, neighbours, colleagues and to the ends of the earth, aligning our ambitions with what he wants to do in his world.

Picking up thoughts from some of last year's sermons we must consider our role as stewards of God's earth; we should take our place in ruling our nation through involvement in the democratic system; and we should find ways of expressing concern for and praying for the persecuted church. If we are to share in Christ's rule all of these must feature in one way or another, not always as individuals, but certainly as the corporate body of the church, our local expression of the bride of Christ.

Living this out, making God's agenda ours, living faithfully for him in every context - this is quite a challenge but I want to end this morning by spelling out that any cost is worth paying to be married to God because

(iv) **God's king is worth honouring**

The one to whom God's people are married is the perfect King. Here it is, then. There is a perfect marriage, the marriage of our dreams. It is marriage to God's king. To quote the psalmist: He is the most excellent of men. His lips drip with grace. "No one speaks like this man" the soldiers said of Jesus. He successfully pursues truth humility and righteousness; his right hand displays awesome deeds; those who oppose him will fall beneath his feet; there are none who can stand up to him. He is a man of justice, a lover of all that is good. And, most important of all v11 he is enthralled with the beauty of his bride.

It's true. He loves us and longs for us to be made perfect for the wedding day. In the NT we find Paul in Ephesians telling husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. He showed us the extent of his love by dying on the cross for us. As Rico Tice so often says: we are more wicked than we could ever imagine and more loved than we could ever dream of.

And Paul goes on to tell us that the reason Christ died was so that he could make us perfect, a bride without wrinkle or blemish.

An Iranian friend of ours told us that she spent 5 hours at the beautician on the morning of her wedding. Judging by the photos the beautician did a great job. She is ordinarily very attractive but on that day she was stunning, almost flawless.

Jesus died so that you and I may be made flawless, not physically so, but in our character. His death deals with the punishment our sin deserves. We are no longer condemned. Our conscience is clean. But more than that, his death deals with the power of sin. We no longer need to sin. We have the power not to and the love Christ has for us gives us reason not to sin. In relationship with him we have something far better, an inner motivation not to sin.

More than that, we will share in his glory. The promise made to God's king in v6 can be claimed equally by his bride. Like him we too will be anointed with the oil of joy (v7). There is a joy in walking with Christ that is second to none. And that joy is often linked with the spread of the gospel, with God bringing many sons to glory. Look at vv 16-17 with me [READ]

In marriage to God's king we are promised fruitfulness – people of every tribe nation and tongue coming to share in the wedding feast and the eternal joy that follows.

CT Studd the 19th century aristocrat and England cricketer who gave away his fortune and became a missionary spoke of his joy on leading his first friend to Christ. He said: I have tasted almost all the pleasures that this world can give (and given his privileged upbringing and successful cricket career they were many) ... but those pleasures were as nothing compared to the joy that the leading of that one soul to the Lord gave me."

I remember talking with someone I knew in a previous church. I'm not sure where he stood spiritually. He was a solicitor and was amazed when he discovered I had been one too and had given it up to become a missionary. "That's what I'm afraid of" he said, "I'm afraid God might ask me to do the same." It's true that from his side of the fence it can seem a daunting prospect being asked to leave the security of a well paid job to embark into a completely unknown and apparently insecure future. I felt the same when I began but I've discovered God is no man's debtor

For 27 years Catherine and I have been dependent on God and his people for our income and not once have we been in need. We always had a roof over our head. We've had clothes to wear and food to eat; we've had a car to drive and holidays to enjoy. God has never let us down...because we are married to him. He is our husband. He loves us and he provides for us.

God may be calling some of you to step out in a similar way to give your life to crossing cultures with the gospel or to be a pastor here in the UK. However God calls the majority of us to remain where we are and to live a Christ like lifestyle in our jobs, in our neighbourhoods and in your families. That can be a challenge too!

To refuse to engage in those slightly dodgy dealings at work; to refuse to engage in gossip with neighbours; to give time to a colleague in need when you've got your own deadline to meet; to devote yourself to an elderly or sick relative. These are tough challenges, but again God will not let us down. If we put him first God will honour us. And he will honour every effort to make Him known.

We have a single friend staying with us at the moment. For many years she was a Sunday School teacher and she was celebrating with us how many of the youngsters she taught are now playing a leading role in their churches all over the UK. She delights in many of them as if they were her children.

Weddings are joyful occasions and marriage to the Lamb of God is the same but on an altogether grander scale because we can every confidence that the King of Kings to whom we are betrothed will never let us down. He loves us with an everlasting love and in his presence there is fullness of joy. So in conclusion...

Conclusion

Everytime there is a ref to William & Kate in the news think of our marriage to God; think of the wedding feast of the lamb; think of all the wonderful new family we've acquired; think about the perfect bridegroom who gave himself up for us. Remember Paul's words in Romans 8:31-32 "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave himself up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things.

Think about these things. Rejoice that the King has come and he is preparing his bride for his wedding day and think about those wedding vows - all his promises to us – that he will keep perfectly.

The Psalmist tells us that his heart is bursting to tell us about the King. This King has come once to die for us and he is coming again to take us to the wedding feast and an eternity in perfect harmony – married to God

Let us pray