

The Waiting Bride

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[0 : 00] Father, as we turn to your word, we pray that you would show us afresh our hope and our joy and our future in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And as the snow falls to praise you, we ask that we may as well. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. If you would open your Bibles at Revelation 19, near the back of the Bible, 239, Revelation singular, chapter 19.

I was listening to the radio this week and there was an advertisement which told us what the magic of the season was. Just in case you're wondering, the magic of the season is shopping at Richmond Mall.

And Dan and Catherine have just moved to Richmond. So there's all sorts of magic about the Giffords right now. Actually, that's not what the season's about.

As Dan told the children this morning, Advent means coming. And as we go through this season, you'll know that the prayers we pray, the collects and the readings, focus not so much on Jesus' first coming, but on his second coming.

[1 : 21] We prayed today that in the last day when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal. So we are going to look over these four weeks plus Christmas Eve at five hymns from the book of Revelation.

Because in the last book of the Bible, we're taken inside the experience of the second coming of Jesus. And if you have your Bible open and you just flick around Revelation, you can see every now and again, when in the midst of all the sound and the colour and the music, when joy becomes unbearable, the characters break into song.

It's kind of revelation, the musical, in a way. And so what we're going to do is we are going to look at five of these songs. And we're going to start at the end and go backwards just because that's what I want to do.

And we begin there. The key for us today is 19, 6 and 7. If you look halfway down verse 6, remember these words.

Hallelujah. For the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns. What does that look like? Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory. For the marriage of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready.

[2 : 48] Two things for us today. The first thing this teaches us is that if this is true, then all of history and all our lives are fundamentally a love story.

When this world comes to its close, when Jesus Christ comes again and concludes history, when this earth and this heaven are replaced with a new heaven and the new earth and everything that's evil and everything that's opposed to the will of God is put under the judgment, what remains? It's a marriage. And the church is the bride of Christ. It's wonderful. Since before the day God created all the worlds, he has loved us.

He has pursued us. Through all of history, through sending his son, he has made covenant, he's bound himself to us, he's made promises and he's been utterly, utterly, utterly faithful to us, even at the cost of the life of his own son.

This is the way of God with us. We start Exodus again next year. We will see that as God comes to Sinai, it is a marriage. Through the prophets, God sends his messengers to woo his people who keep going after false gods because of his love for her.

[4 : 07] And it's a very interesting and it's a fluid metaphor because when we come to the New Testament, we discover that, I may not make this clear, but the metaphor turns on its head and we discover it's the mirror of a metaphor.

In Ephesians 5, the Apostle Paul tells us that human marriage is a metaphor of the deep spiritual reality of our relationship as a church with Christ.

So it's both a metaphor as well as the mirror of a metaphor, which is very complicated and why someone said to me at the door after the nine o'clock, I didn't understand a word you said this morning. Really.

Really. He said, where were you going? I said, actually, that was what the sermon was about. So be patient for just a moment.

I think what the text is telling us here is that if you ask the question, what's the inside of salvation like? What's it like on the inside?

[5 : 17] The marriage supper of the Lamb tells us it's about two parties loving each other and longing to be together and doing whatever it takes to be with one another.

Now we talk about our love for God. We talk about our love for God. what's amazing here is that Jesus wants us and he wants to be with us. That's why he came at Christmas.

That's why he died. That's why he rose and that's why he's coming again. And if you belong to Jesus Christ, if you've placed your faith in him, if you don't remember anything else from this morning, if you sweep everything else out of your life, everything superficial and everything that's not all that important, at its bedrock, what your life is about and my life is about, is that it is a love story with Jesus Christ.

Now I think we've done our best to commercialise marriage these days, but that was not so in the New Testament times. Marriage was a two-stage event. The first was the betrothal and then there was the wedding and they were separated by quite a time.

And before the law, when a couple was betrothed, they were husband and wife and the only way you could break that and the obligations it entailed was by divorce. Remember Joseph just before the first Christmas.

[6 : 38] And what would happen is on the day of the wedding, the bride would gather with all her attendants at her house and the groom would gather with all his attendants at his house and the groom would set off with all his friends making a big noise through the town or through the village or through the city to the bride's house.

And then he would pick her up, metaphorically. They would gather them together and then they would, with a double-sized crowd, go back through the village in the city to his place where they would have a marriage feast that would usually last, well, could last up to a week.

We've record of some lasting more than that. That's where we are. We are, as a church, we are betrothed in faith to Jesus Christ and we are waiting for the day when the groom comes with a great noise and takes us home to heaven for the feast that's going to last for all eternity.

That's what Jesus meant in John 14. Remember the familiar passage we read every funeral? Let not your hearts be troubled, Jesus said. Believe in God, you believe also in me.

In my Father's house, he said, in many rooms, if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to be with myself that where I am, you may be also.

[8 : 05] It is the language of a groom. The only thing we are waiting for is for the great procession to break forth and that is the noise at the beginning of verse 6.

The voice of a great multitude, the sound of many waters, the sound of mighty thunder peals because the love of God is going to bring history to a great, big, consuming halt at the marriage festival of the Lamb and the Church.

There is more to this love story and what makes it such an amazing love story is the terrible contrast between the bride in chapter 19 and this character in chapters 17 and 18 called the harlot, the prostitute, the whore of Babylon.

Now, today we speak of sex trade workers, partly in recognition of the fact that those who are involved in this life are often victims and slaves themselves.

That is not the picture of Babylon in 17 and 18. She is wealthy beyond belief. She has all the resources she needs.

[9 : 22] She is malevolent, vicious. She is an exploiter of the innocent. She trades in blood and violence. She hates Christ and she hates the Church.

Turn back to chapter 17, verses 1, 2 and 4. Parental guidance recommended. 17.1.

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the dwellers on earth have become drunk.

Verse 4. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication. And on her forehead was written a name of mystery, Babylon the Great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations. And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus Christ.

[10:30] There's a whole cluster of symbols and metaphors here. The point is that we're meant to see a great contrast. The bride of the Lamb is clothed in fine linen, pure, bright.

And we read in the next two chapters in Revelation, she is the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven. We, the bride, we are the new Jerusalem.

And the contrast here, as you see, is the whore of Babylon clothed in purple and gold, using all that she can to enslave, she is Babylon the Great.

Who is this? The whore of Babylon is the culture and the civilization built on the principles of Babel, trying to build ourselves a name for ourselves in unbelief and defiance against God so that we can get up into heaven and we can take God's place from him.

She is everything that seduces us from the worship of the true God and she makes her best appearance in false religion. In religion that makes no demands on us. Hers is a religion of commerce.

[11:40] There's a commercial exchange where she comes to us and she exploits our needs and our desires and she promises us a faith without any cost. Salvation without repentance.

Cheap grace, if you will. And what she offers is a lie. It's a counterfeit of true love. And her pride and her easy, repentance-less religion spreads like a spiritual pornography, corrupting everything before it.

And part of her corruption is that she really has to just destroy the church. She has to shed the blood of the church because the very existence of the church is a threat and an offence to her lies and her adulteries.

I mean, just think of it from her perspective for just a moment. The true church are a group of people who love Jesus Christ for no other reason than that he loved them first and who are willing to live in this life bearing their cross.

Who are secure in the love of Christ because they're secure in the future of Christ. The church lives in the world and serves and uses the world but doesn't love this world.

[12:56] They won't be seduced into loving Babylon because they know how profoundly Christ has proven his love for us. And as we draw security and as we draw significance from the grace of Jesus Christ towards us, it just constantly undermines her enticements.

So what she has to do is she has to create a counterfeit and she creates a complacent and a reasonable faith, a faith that affirms us in our choices but never challenges us to repent.

And you know what she hates more than anything else? She hates forgiveness. She hates the grace of God and when Christians start to understand the grace of God because you see, it smashes the whole commercial side of religion.

It exposes her lies. It frees us from all the slavery to our own sins and darkness and corruption. That is why what's happening here, you see, it's telling us that history is actually, it is a love story but it's a love story of a conflict of two great loves.

Babylon comes to us dressed beautifully and demands that we love her, offering us treasure and pleasure and all the promise of the world. But you see, Christ is the one who has truly loved us and has freed us from our sins and in that forgiveness we understand something of the glory and grace that he has given to us in the true life.

[14:27] And when people change sides and move from a commitment to Babylon to a commitment to Jesus Christ, it's treason. It cannot be tolerated and so she persecutes the church.

Very important for the first hearers of this who are facing brutal and vicious persecution. Whenever the church is harassed and persecuted, you can just get a whiff of the whore of Babylon.

But you see, here is the contrast and I think that's what makes this such a lovely vision in chapter 19. Look down at the end of verse 7 to the description of the bride. She has made herself ready.

How? It was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure, for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

How does the bride make herself ready for the marriage? How do we as a church make ourselves ready for the coming of Jesus Christ? The answer is by clothing ourselves with many righteous deeds.

[15 : 38] That's right. A life which is bright and pure, acting before others so that our light will so shine they will give glory to our Father in heaven. And where do these good deeds come from?

Where's the fabric, the cloth to make this fabric? And the answer is it's the righteousness of Jesus Christ because this cloth has been granted, literally given to us.

And every one of our actions and deeds that's done for the Lord Jesus Christ is offered to God through the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Everything we do, mixed motives, nothing we do is completely pure. It's still acceptable to God and God still delights in it because it comes through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

God knows we are dust and he has provided everything so that we can offer him a life that is pure and bright. That is the righteousness of Christ.

[16 : 39] Don't put it on loosely. Put it on and clasp it around yourself as a skin so that we might reflect Jesus to each other.

put on the Lord Jesus Christ. And I think we see that, don't we? We see this with each other. And sometimes we look at each other and we look at what someone does and we see the face of Jesus Christ.

That is what it means to make ourselves ready. It doesn't mean to be busy. It means to put on the Lord Jesus and allow him to transform in what we say and how we say it and what we think and what we do.

We make ourselves ready for him. Heaven is about him. I sometimes go to funerals and I get the picture that the great hope of heaven is being reunited with Aunt Gloria.

You know, there is a part of truth to that. It will be the communion and the feast together. But our great joy is not so much Aunt Gloria. Our great joy, our highest joy is Jesus Christ who has loved us and given himself and saved us.

[17 : 48] So, history is a love story. That's the first point and the long point. But it teaches us something, a second thing and I just leave this with you briefly. That is that the end changes the middle.

If you know in a love story how it's going to end, it entirely changes how you live in the middle of it. and I think that's why this chapter in the Bible, chapter 19, is the first time the word hallelujah is translated.

We've waited all the way through the Bible for this word and four times, verse 1, verse 3, verse 4, verse 6, with great noise. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! I recently watched a World Cup rugby match between Portugal and New Zealand and New Zealand are the world champions and they won the game by 100 points and when they sang the national anthem they were just bored.

They just murmured the national anthem. It's such a pity they've got a great national anthem. Then we went to Portugal and the Portuguese guys stood there holding each other tight, singing, shouting at the top of their lungs completely out of tune, yelling their national anthem and weeping as they could.

It was fantastic and the next day I was in a Portuguese restaurant. The guy who owns the restaurant doesn't speak any English and I started to talk about the rugby cup and he went and he got the Portuguese paper and although the team had been beaten up by 100 points they had a ticker tape parade when they returned home which I think is just, I've gone off the sermon, where am I?

[19 : 37] I think that feeling of being in front of people who actually, you know, they believe something, it's a contrast because you know chapter 18 finishes with silence.

Verse 22, the sound of harpers and minstrels of flute players and trumpeters shall be heard in thee in Babylon no more. The sound of the millstone shall be heard in thee no more.

Verse 23, the voice of the bridegroom and the bride shall be heard in thee no more. And chapter 19 opens, after this I heard what seemed to be a loud voice, a great multitude in heaven crying, hallelujah, salvation and glory and power belong to our God for his judgments are true and just.

And he has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication. He's avenged on her the blood of his servants. You might think that's a very strange thing to sing about, judgment. I mean isn't that something we want to hide from people?

You know that's the stuff of an internal memo isn't it? Certainly not something to be happy about but that's absolutely wrong. All of heaven loves the judgment of God and celebrates the judgment of God because judgment and salvation are two sides of the one thing.

[21 : 02] I want to be clear about this. If you read through these words there's no gloating, there's no revenge, there's no way we're right, they were wrong. It's not even the relief that suffering is over.

It's not even a relief that corruption has been dealt with. Their joy is this, that the judgments of God are true and just.

So the four hallelujahs of this chapter teach us that true Christian worship looks at evil but looks at evil through the eyes of God and loves what's true and just.

You can never love the judgment of God if you still have attachment and love for Babylon and we're still embarrassed about the judgment of God if our view is narrow and self-preoccupied.

But what this love story is telling us is that salvation is much bigger than my salvation or your salvation. It is about the whole plan of God the love of God that created the world in the beginning.

[22 : 08] The love of God that is bringing this world into a new creation and the bride who is brought will be purified and everything will be pushed away everything that makes us weep everything of which we have to repent.

And I think that is why true Christian worship always has a note of tragic depth to it because we know something of what it cost Jesus Christ to love us and provide our salvation.

What is our most joyous feast? It's the one that centres on the body broken and the blood shared. This is what it means to hold salvation and judgment together and when we look and when we see on that day we will know that his judgments are majestically incontestably eternally magnificently just and true and although we are aware that our sins deserve his judgment we will stand there righteous in the clothing which was bought for us at a terrible cost.

A very different thing than optimism and being positive. Optimism is turning a blind eye to things that corrupt and things that are not just and it replaces the worship of God with just our own naive self-affirmation and it's one of Babylon's baubles.

Instead we know that all of history will end with a great shout when the groom comes and all of heaven will sing hallelujah salvation and glory and power belong to our God.

[23 : 47] The same glory that we saw in the birth of Jesus the same glory we saw in the cross of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus will now be made undeniably manifest and knowing all of this heaven says to us praise God worship God bless God hallelujah for Christ has died Christ has risen and Christ is coming again.

So as we move into this season of Advent hold this that we stand between the two comings of Jesus Christ and just as he was born and did come the first time we can trust that he will come again and the same power that raised him from the dead the same power that he will bring in his hands on the judgment day is at work in us now through faith in Jesus Christ making us long for him making us love him making us love one another and have lives that are bright and pure at their best because history is a love story your life is a love story and this vision ought to inform how we live today and it gives us a magnificent sense of proportion and perspective doesn't it our faith is caught up in something far bigger than we can imagine the evil that we know in our own hearts and the evil that we experience around us will one day be put away and our lives here are very short and our lives there are very long so we need to make ourselves ready for that day when we will join with all heaven singing salvation and glory and power belong to our God and to the Lamb

Amen and to the Lamb and who has nothing Titus in Washington visit to the Lamb at WilliamBurn who has been and Esp and only including the measurements and master andotive ofAD