

*The Bride of Christ*

The first lesson and the gospel reading are usually similar in theme or in the images they use. This week, in the scriptures assigned by the Revised Common Lectionary, both the gospel and the Old Testament readings talk about weddings, marriage, and brides and grooms. The prophet Isaiah says that God rejoices over his people like a groom rejoices over his bride. John's gospel reports Jesus performing his first miracle at a wedding Cana of Galilee. And we are not far removed from the season of Christmas, where we are often reminded that Mary was betrothed, today we might say "engaged," to Joseph when she was discovered to be pregnant with Jesus. We may have some sense of what weddings and marriage may have been like in Bible times. But an even closer look at marriages and weddings in Jesus' day may give us some additional insights into these powerful, enduring institutions created by God, and how God uses them to reveal his love for us.

Marriage in Bible times more or less could be divided into four stages. The first stage was *matchmaking*, kind of like you might have seen in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Occasionally a man and woman might have met, and fell in love, and found a way to get married, but that would have been rare and certainly frowned upon then. The idea of romantic love being the basis for marriage developed relatively late in human history. Usually, a couple's families, or someone the families contracted with, such as a rabbi, arranged the marriage for social and economic, and maybe even religious, reasons. Essential in this process was a written contract, called, in Hebrew, the *ketubah*. This

contract specified the husband's duties to the wife and stated something known as the *bride price*.

The *bride price* was what the groom paid to the father of the bride. It was sort of a security deposit that the father of the bride could keep if the future groom died or abandoned his future wife during the engagement period. Then, after the wedding, when the bride pretty much became part of the groom's family, the bride's father kept the *bride price* as compensation for losing his daughter. I'm not sure what criteria they used to rank brides then, but the more desirable the bride, the higher the *bride price*.

In Isaiah's prophecy, God spiritually marries his people. Human marriage is a sign and symbol of the kind of relationship God desires to have with us, His people. In this marriage God is the groom and we are the bride. How is that marriage arranged? Who is the matchmaker? As Luther says in his Small Catechism's explanation to the second article of the Creed, we cannot by our own strength or reason come to Christ. It is the Holy Spirit that brings us to faith in Christ, and the Spirit speaks to us through the Word. The Holy Spirit is the matchmaker who brings us and God together.

God's Word is also our *ketubah*, a contract not written in stone like the Commandments given to Moses that we broke, but rather an agreement written on our hearts. There God promises that we are part of his family forever, and we respond to Him with love and faithfulness. And the seal on all this is the highest *bride price* ever paid: Jesus' life. Jesus gave his own life as the price necessary to make us his bride eternally.

The next stage of marriage in Bible times was the betrothal, which was much more formal than engagements are today. After the marriage contract, the *ketubah*, was worked out, the agreement was ritually finalized at a special meal. Here the prospective groom would offer the future bride a cup of wine, representing his marriage proposal, which she would accept if the wedding was going to move forward. Of course, there is always the possibility that for some reason the prospective bride might not accept the groom's offer, but that would be uncommon. So at this point, if the bride officially accepts, for all intents and purposes the couple was married. However, the bride continued to live in her father's home for another year. Imagine that! During that year, the groom would put as addition on to his father's house where he and his bride would live when the year of betrothal was ended.-

If we look closely we can see many similarities between the betrothal period and our life as Christians. In the Holy Communion, Christ, the bridegroom, offers us a cup wine, which is a new covenant of love, a new testament written in his blood. When we receive the blood of Christ, in true faith, we are re-affirming our love for our Savior. Implied in the marriage contract was that the bride would be faithful to her husband and bear his children. However, some people, in the freedom God gives us, might reject god and His Word. That's a possibility, and God isn't going to force anyone to be His bride against their will. But those who want to be the bride of Christ are to remain faithful to Christ and produce good fruits, the fruits of the Spirit. Scripture also tells us that Jesus has already prepared a place, a mansion for us, in his Father's house. Like the bride, we await the arrival of the bridegroom Christ, to come and take us home.

That is the third stage of marriage in Bible times: the return of the groom. At some time after the couple was betrothed for a year, not the groom himself, but the groom's father, would decide that the special wedding chamber was complete and send the groom to collect his bride. Although no one knew the exact moment that this would happen, the bride and her friends would be filled with expectation. They would have known when the year was up and would have seen the progress on the addition being completed. The bridesmaids would be waiting day and night with the bride, sometimes for days, sometimes for weeks, for the bridegroom who could appear at any moment. This certainly gives us some insight into Jesus' parable of wise and foolish bridesmaids and their waiting.

When the groom did arrive at the bride's home, he would let out a shout and a ram's horn would be blown. Then the groom would carry his bride to the bridal chamber he had built for them. Their friends would accompany them on this joyful journey, celebrating as they went along. Upon arriving at their new home, the bride and groom had some time alone together. But even at this advanced point in the process, if the bride was found to have been unfaithful, as might have been suspected of the Virgin Mary, the groom had the right to nullify the marriage and get back his *bride price*. If all went as planned, the fourth and final stage, a seven-day feast, would follow. Again we see foreshadowing of Christ's glorious but unexpected return at God the Father's discretion to take us home. And we see the joy we will know with him in eternity, a joy we glimpse now in our worship. And we also see the importance of faithfulness and purity in our response to God's overture of grace to us.

So what will it be like for us when we, the church, the bride of Christ, go live with Jesus, our husband, in his eternal kingdom? Scripture tells us that it will be a place of peace and joy, with no more pain, sorrow or tears. Scripture also tells us that it will be a place where nothing unclean is allowed: there will be no wickedness, no perversion, no lying or deceit there. That will be a place far better than what we have here on earth now. That is a place we long for. And so we pray, *Maranatha*, “Come, Lord Jesus.” Amen.