

# MARRIAGE AND THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD

## Study Four

### THE GREATEST MARRIAGE OF ALL TIME

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#### THE SECRET OF THE UNIVERSE

A number of years ago in January we were staying at Victor Harbor for the annual New Creation Teaching Ministry Summer School. One afternoon we went for a walk to Granite Island across the causeway. At that time there was a chairlift from the end of the causeway to the highest point on the island. Our youngest son wanted a ride on the chairlift, so we put him and his mate on the chairlift, to go up to the top of the hill and down again, and we stayed chatting with the chairlift operator, who seemed to want to talk with us. A very interesting fellow. He was sitting there, getting rather bored, but watching the people come across the causeway, and thinking deeply. Called himself quite a spiritual person, and told us of one or two experiences that made him think this was so. Told us how he had been in and out of churches, but how he believed in God. I had not identified myself as a minister—he just came out with all this. He ended up telling us about his marriage. How, when he met his wife, this was one relationship that did not chill off after a while, like all the others had, but remained and grew, and drew him out of himself into the life of another person. And he said, ‘Do you know why I think we get married? It’s not just to have children and raise a family. It is to discover the secret of the universe. I really mean, of God.’ Not bad for a chair-lift operator! He had not been to our Summer School, and did not seem particularly interested when I mentioned it to him. But he had put into a few words what it had taken some of us speakers at Summer School several lectures to spell out.

Many of the great stories of folklore and literature end with a marriage. It could be something to do with what is built into us as human beings. The Bible says that the story of the human race culminates in a marriage. We will see how God in His faithfulness has always regarded His relationship with us in this way. We will look at the wedding at the end of the universe in Revelation 19:5–9. We will see who the bride is, in all her glory, and who the bridegroom is, and why he is called ‘the Lamb’. And what that means for us now—in our lives and in our marriages.

#### *Question for discussion*

- *What have we seen, or known in our own experience, of the connection between marriage and the secret of the universe—that is, of God?*

## FAITHFUL GOD

At the end of the last study, we looked at a note on the Song of Songs in the Good News Bible:

These songs have often been interpreted by Jews as a picture of the relationship between God and his people, and by Christians as a picture of the relationship between Christ and the Church.

God has often seen His relationship with Israel in terms of a marriage covenant. God looked fondly back to the early days of His relationship with Israel in this parable-like picture-story:

As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you out of compassion for you; but you were thrown out in the open field, for you were abhorred on the day you were born.

I passed by you, and saw you flailing about in your blood. As you lay in your blood, I said to you, 'Live! and grow up like a plant of the field.' You grew up and became tall and arrived at full womanhood; your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare. I passed by you again and looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness: I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord GOD, and you became mine (Ezekiel 16:4–8).

The prophet Jeremiah was called upon to remind Israel of their relationship with God in similar terms:

Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD: I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown (Jeremiah 2:2).

This was at a time (around 600 BC) when Israel had clearly turned away from God, as He spoke of:

. . . the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD (Jeremiah 31:32).

God promised through Jeremiah 'a new covenant' that was not like that earlier one. Before this, in the northern kingdom of Israel, the prophet Hosea had been called upon to witness, through the difficult circumstances of his own life and marriage, to God's faithfulness in the face of Israel's unfaithfulness:

When the LORD first spoke to Israel through Hosea, he said to Hosea, 'Go and get married; your wife will be unfaithful, and your children will be just like her. In the same way my people have left me and become unfaithful' (Hosea 1:2, Good News Bible).

The Good News Bible has this introduction to the Book of Hosea:

The prophet Hosea preached in the northern kingdom of Israel, after the prophet Amos, during the troubled times before the fall of Samaria in 721 B.C. He was especially concerned about the idolatry of the people and their faithlessness toward God. Hosea boldly pictured this faithlessness in terms of his own disastrous marriage to an unfaithful woman. Just as his wife Gomer turned out to be unfaithful to him, so God's people had deserted the Lord. For this, judgment would fall on Israel. Yet in the end God's constant love for his people would prevail, and he would win the nation back to himself and restore the relationship. This love is expressed in the moving words: 'How can I give you up, Israel? How can I abandon you? . . . My heart will not let me do it! My love for you is too strong' (11:8).

Isaiah prophesied the glorious restoration of this relationship between God and His people:

For your Maker is your husband,  
the LORD of hosts is his name;  
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,  
the God of the whole earth he is called.  
For the LORD has called you  
like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,  
like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off,  
says your God.  
For a brief moment I abandoned you,  
but with great compassion I will gather you.  
In overflowing wrath for a moment  
I hid my face from you,  
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,  
says the LORD, your Redeemer (Isaiah 54:5–8).

So God was also able to say to Israel through the prophet Jeremiah:

I have loved you with an everlasting love;  
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you (Jeremiah 31:3).

### ***Question for discussion***

- *If God sees His relationship with us in terms of marriage, what are some of the implications of that for our own marriages?*

## **THE MARRIAGE OF THE LAMB AND HIS BRIDE**

The New Testament sees the glorious restoration of this relationship between God and His people as happening in Christ, culminating in a great marriage celebration:

And from the throne came a voice saying,  
‘Praise our God,  
all you his servants,  
and all who fear him,  
small and great.’  
Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out,  
‘Hallelujah!  
For the Lord our God  
the Almighty reigns.  
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;  
to her it has been granted to be clothed  
with fine linen, bright and pure’—  
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.  
And the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’ And he said to me, ‘These are true words of God’ (Revelation 19:5–9).

Who is this ‘bride’? She is obviously well-dressed, in ‘fine linen, bright and pure’, which is equivalent to ‘the righteous deeds’ of God’s holy people. She has ‘made herself ready’ by being ‘clothed’ in what has been ‘granted’ to her. The passage goes on to depict the

bridegroom as a warrior king, called ‘Faithful and True’, who is victorious over all evil (see Revelation 19:11–16). But why here is he called ‘the Lamb’? Whoever these two are, there are lots of people at this wedding—‘a great multitude’. They are all in great gladness, and God must have done a wonderful thing, for they are all praising God.

## A Bride Adorned for Her Husband

To find out more about the bride, we turn to a vision of the end times given in the final chapters of the Bible:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

‘See, the home of God is among the people.<sup>1</sup>  
He will dwell with them;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;  
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away’ (Revelation 21:1–4).

This is set in a new era, in a whole new order of things. The things to do with sin—sorrow, death, sadness and suffering—have been wholly removed. The relationship of God with His people is secured for ever. Featured in this glorious vision is the ‘bride adorned for her husband’. We saw from Revelation 19 that she has ‘made herself ready’ by being ‘clothed’ in what has been ‘granted’ to her. Here we see that she and her preparation as a bride are the work of God: she is ‘coming down out of heaven from God’; not coming up from the earth.

Why is she called ‘the holy city, the new Jerusalem’? We recall what the husband said to his bride in the Song of Songs:

My love, you are as beautiful as Tirzah,  
as lovely as the city of Jerusalem,  
as breathtaking as these great cities (Song 6:4, GNB).

We saw that she was being described there as a person of great dynamism, strength and magnificence. We also know that a city is a place made up of very many people. It appears that this bride is made up not just of one person but of many. And what was distinctive about the city of Jerusalem is that it was the chosen dwelling-place of God. The picture-language used of this ‘bride’ indicates the reality of ‘the dwelling-place of God is with His people’, in a permanent and unsullied union—the true marriage.

This we find in the more detailed description of the bride that follows:

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God (Revelation 21:9–10).

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<sup>1</sup> Where the New Revised Standard Version has ‘mortals’, Today’s New International Version has ‘the people’ (Greek *anthrōpōn*, human persons). This is the more preferable translation, especially in a situation where ‘Death [mortality] will be no more’!

This exalted one shines with a glory that is not from herself, by which a rare beauty, of crystal-clear purity, is bestowed on her:

It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal (Revelation 21:11).

Further details link her with the history of God's people Israel:

It has a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites; on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates (Revelation 21:12–13).

Having a number of gates means that lots of people can come in. We find there is also a link with God's New Testament people:

And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (Revelation 21:14).

The reference to 'twelve apostles' may give us a clue as to the identity of 'the Lamb'.

The city itself is of vast dimensions, beyond any city known on earth:

The angel who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal (Revelation 21:15–16).

The distance 'fifteen hundred miles' (Greek: twelve thousand stadia, equivalent to nearly 2,500 kilometres) is roughly the length of a straight line between Melbourne and Alice Springs: imagine a square going out from that into Queensland and out into the Pacific ocean, and a cube going up from that 2,500 kilometres out into space. There is room there for a great number of people! All of this is, of course, picture-language, trying to imagine the unimaginable.

The different elements of the vision describe aspects of the reality, without necessarily trying to fit with each other, as we see when we are shown the wall:

He also measured its wall, one hundred forty-four cubits by human measurement, which the angel was using (Revelation 21:17).

Its height, literally equivalent to 216 feet or 65 metres (towering compared with normal city walls), does not fit with the dimensions of the city that have just been given, but speaks nevertheless of impregnable strength and unassailable security. Language is stretched to breaking point to convey the preciousness and purity of this incomparable reality:

The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass (Revelation 21:18).

Who has ever seen 'gold, clear as glass'? But together these words convey the impression, and describe the indescribable. A similar attempt is made to convey the multi-faceted sheer beauty of the bride:

The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass (Revelation 21:19–21).

It is customary for a bride to wear some jewellery on her wedding day, but no bride was ever adorned like this!

We return to the city as the dwelling-place of God. It was the temple, with its graded levels of access, that made the earthly Jerusalem God's dwelling-place in Israel. Such is the immediate, full and directly accessible presence of God here, however, that the need for any such structure is dispensed with:

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb (Revelation 21:22).

No temple in the city! Elsewhere in the New Testament, we who belong to Christ are described as God's temple, both corporately as the church and individually in our bodies (see 1 Corinthians 3:16–17; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21). We are the temple, but there is no temple here because God Himself with the Lamb is the temple! Our whole and complete union with God cannot be spoken of in more intimate terms than this.

The glory of this love-union, outshining all else, will encompass nations of peoples, all purified and cleansed from every trace of evil:

And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 21:23–27).

Who can envisage the ongoing life of this glorious existence, which God planned for us in His love for us from before the foundation of the world, and which He will see through to its full completion by His saving love-action in Christ:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever (Revelation 22:1–5).

### ***Question for discussion***

- *If we are part of this reality, saved for it through believing in Christ, what then does this tell us about the nature of our own marriage relationships?*

## **A Lamb Slaughtered Yet Standing**

Prominent in this depiction of the holy city are repeated references to 'the Lamb'. We now look elsewhere in the book of the Revelation to discover the nature and identity of this one who is called 'the Lamb'. Who is he, and what has he done? He first appears in a vision that describes what is going on in the heavenly throne-room of God, where he is given a most unusual description:

Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered . . . (Revelation 5:6).

I pulled up outside Dave's place just after he had slaughtered a sheep for their home use. The sheep's carcass was hanging by its hind legs under a gum tree down by the shed. The head was dangling where its throat had been cut, and the blood was still dripping into the dirt. Dave began to dress the carcass by slitting it up its front. He removed the 'lights' or lungs of the sheep and threw them to the dog, who was eagerly waiting to devour them. City people who enjoy lamb chops are usually at one remove from this process by which the meat ends up on the table. Truckloads of animals that we pass on the highways are often headed for the abattoirs. In the ancient world, people would have been much more familiar with the slaughtering of animals for food. Especially in the temple at Jerusalem, where the lambs were sacrificed.

This Lamb in the heavenly vision is one that has been slaughtered. Yet here he is standing alive—he has defeated death. In the picture-language used in the vision he has 'seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth' (Revelation 5:6)—he is all-powerful and all-seeing. He is given authority and responsibility over the unfolding of all history, and over the releasing of God's judgements upon the evil of the earth, with a view to the bringing in of 'new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home' (2 Peter 3:13).

The 'Lamb' is clearly identified as Jesus, who was put to death and raised to life. We turn now from the picture-language of the heavenly vision to the actual events in history and in our personal lives that this vision-language is really all about.

### ***Question for discussion***

- *What do we find confronting about seeing Jesus as a slaughtered Lamb? Especially when we are talking about marriage? Why is this so, and what does this tell us about ourselves?*

## **THE TRUE BRIDEGROOM**

We pick up the story on a Friday morning in Jerusalem in April around the year 33 AD. 'Pilate' is the name of the Roman governor Pontius Pilatus:

Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him.' Then they all shouted out together, 'Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!' (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; but they kept shouting, 'Crucify, crucify him!' A third time he said to them, 'Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.' But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished (Luke 23:13–25).

What do we notice about this? Three times the Roman governor, the highest authority in the land, protests that Jesus is innocent, and not deserving of death. Yet in the end, Jesus is handed over to be executed. Jesus had said that this is what would happen, and that this was God's will as spoken through the prophets in the Old Testament (see Luke 18:31–33). The question arises: If Jesus is going to his death for no sin of his own, who is he going to death for?

We find that Jesus is already in a weakened condition from the flogging that he had received, from the all-night unjust trial he had endured, and from a heavy burden that had come upon his spirit as he prayed the night before that had crushed him almost to death (see Luke 22:41–44), such that he needs someone else’s help to carry his own instrument of death to the place of execution:

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, “Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.” Then they will begin to say to the mountains, “Fall on us”; and to the hills, “Cover us.” For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?’ (Luke 23:26–31).

We sense that something terrible is happening here, way beyond anything that the onlookers can take in, that has to do with the judgement of God coming on our evil like a fierce bushfire.

Crucifixion—hanging a person up on a cross until they died of pain, exposure, blood loss and asphyxiation—was a particularly brutal form of execution practised by the Romans, reserved for the worst kind of criminals:

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left (Luke 23:32–33).

What was Jesus’ reaction to this?

Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’ (Luke 23:34).

That anyone should pray for the forgiveness of those who were doing such a terrible thing to him is remarkable enough. Jesus was doing more than that. He was praying to God, whom he knew as his own Father, asking the Father to do in him whatever was necessary for those who were doing this to him to be completely forgiven. That is not something that happens lightly. Something must happen to sin, and to sinners, for forgiveness to come. We are told that Christ ‘himself carried up our sins in his body to the tree’ (1 Peter 2:24, NRSV footnote), where he suffered the curse of God that is on sinful humanity (see Gal. 3:13–14) and the condemnation that was due to us in our sins (see Romans 8:3), such that he was even made ‘to be sin’ for us (2 Corinthians 5:21), so that we might come out into righteousness. The words, ‘they do not know what they are doing’ emphasise the terrible thing that is being perpetrated here. This is not a plea that they be excused on the basis of ignorance. Jesus is saying that they are so far gone in evil that they do not even realise the horrific nature of what they are doing—Father, bring forgiveness to them even for that! And do in me whatever is necessary for this to be so.

Unaware of all this, the soldiers on duty coldly continued their gruesome task:

And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’ There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ (Luke 23:34–39).

Three times, Jesus was mockingly called upon to save himself. It is not as if he could not do that. He knew that at any time he could call to his Father who would immediately send ‘more than twelve legions of angels’ to rescue him (Matthew 26:53). Why did he refuse? It was because there was someone more important to him than himself that he was determined to save: you, and me, and the rest of sinful humankind.

Other gospel accounts tell us that both the criminals crucified with Jesus taunted him (see Matthew 27:44; Mark 15:32). Luke tells us that one of them then had a change of heart:

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise’ (Luke 23:39–43).

What would bring a criminal, who had been violently anti-authority, to say such a thing? We would expect him to go to his death railing against his fate and saying it was unfair. But here he is now, in the fear of God, saying that he is getting just what he deserves, and that the man hanging next to him has done nothing wrong to deserve what is happening to him. Not only that, but he sees in this bedraggled figure next to him no one less than God’s own king, coming into his kingdom. And in that kingdom this criminal fully expects to be able to take his place. He would have known that no thief or robber could expect to inherit the kingdom of God (see 1 Corinthians 6:9–11). Yet here he is asking, not to be able to sneak in the back door, but to stand in front of the king and be fully acknowledged by him! How has this come about? Well, what has this criminal heard coming from the lips of Jesus? He has heard Jesus call God ‘Father’—this one is the Son of the Creator of the universe, the heir of all things. And he has heard those words, ‘forgive them’, and has known that he was included in that: he was ‘de-theified’—totally cleansed, forgiven, made righteous and fit for God’s kingdom. This was the only Son of the Father of all, given over to an undeserved death as ‘the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God’ (1 Peter 3:18, RSV). Jesus immediately confirmed his request by saying, ‘today you will be with me in Paradise’—in the immediate presence of God, just as it was in the garden of Eden, and more and better even than that.

Luke tells us next:

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun’s light failed (Luke 23:44–45).

None of us can fathom what happened in those three hours of terrifying darkness. Other gospel writers tell us that at the end of that time Jesus cried out, ‘My God, my God, why did you abandon me?’ (Mark 15:34, GNB). God’s final judgement on us as sinners must be to abandon us to our sin. Jesus went to that fearful place for us so that we now need never go there ourselves. As a result of this we are told:

... and the curtain of the temple was torn in two (Luke 23:45).

At the heart the old temple in Jerusalem was the most holy chamber, where God was known to dwell, separated off from the rest of the temple and the outside world by a big thick heavy curtain. No one could go inside that curtain, on pain of death, except the high priest, once a year, carrying the blood of a special sacrifice (see Leviticus 16). Now, as a result of what had happened on this cross just outside Jerusalem, the curtain was ripped open ‘from top to bottom’ (Mark 15:38)—by no human hand. All of God’s glory could now come streaming out, and we all could now go with free unhindered access right in to God.

Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, he breathed his last (Luke 23:46).

True to his Father’s love for us right to the end, Jesus’ mighty work of taking away the sins of the world was now completed. He offered his life to the Father as a pleasing sacrifice, and was fully accepted.

That was on the Friday afternoon. Jesus’ body was taken down from the cross, and laid in a tomb. It remained there all Saturday. First thing on Sunday morning, some women friends of Jesus came to the tomb to pay their last respects—the tomb was open, and the body was gone! Some angels told them that Jesus was risen from death, as he had said he would. The women went to tell the others, but no one believed them.

Luke then tells of two followers of Jesus who were walking along a country road, and Jesus himself joined them! When they finally recognised him, and that he was alive, he was gone from them. They raced back and told the others in Jerusalem:

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you’ (Luke 24:36).

Not, ‘Where were you lot when I needed you most?’, but ‘Peace be with you’. The peace of total forgiveness of all our sins: peace with God, peace within ourselves, and so peace also with each other. Not surprisingly, they took some convincing:

They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, ‘Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.’ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence (Luke 24:37–43)

—and they did not see it going down, as they might have if he was a ghost. He was solid and real.

Jesus then explained to them what had happened, and what was to follow:

Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:44–49).

So, by the power of the Holy Spirit of God promised by the Father, the followers of Jesus have taken the good news of ‘repentance and forgiveness of sins’, through believing in Jesus and in what God did in him on the cross, out into all the world, down to the present day, even to what we are doing here right now.

### ***Questions for reflection***

- *How do I relate to what happened in Jesus on the cross, and in his rising to life again?*
- *Have I received the forgiveness of all my sins?*
- *Is my faith and hope for living and succeeding in life fixed on Christ alone?*
- *What difference does that make now in my relationships?*

## MARRIAGE IN CHRIST

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ, in this cleansing action of the forgiveness of sins, is shown to be the true husband of the body of people who belong to him in the church:

... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:25–27).

We have all been made for this incredibly close relationship with God. We haven't lived up to it—rather we have gone off away from God in the opposite direction. This shows itself in all sorts of mean and nasty ways. In our own relationships we tend to think more of ourselves than of the other person. When we are in relationships for ourselves first of all, we end up using and manipulating other people. This causes hurt and damage. We carry this with us—it does not go away. We bring this into our marriages, where it can get in the way of true relationship. It needs to have somewhere to go. None of us come to our marriages pure. We need to be put through a process of cleansing and redirecting. Incredibly this is what we see here for us in Jesus on the cross.

A young woman whose life was already sexually complicated and messy was listening to a preacher expounding the glories of belonging to the holy city, the glorious bride of Christ, through believing in Jesus. She came up to him afterwards, her face radiant. 'If I am a part of that bride', she said, 'then I am a virgin again!'<sup>2</sup>

One version of the marriage service begins with these words:

We have come together here in the sight of God, and in the presence of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony; which is an honourable state of life, instituted from the beginning by God himself, signifying to us the spiritual union that is between Christ and his Church.<sup>3</sup>

Every marriage is intended to reflect and participate in this glorious marriage of Christ and his church. The vows themselves reflect something of the extent to which Christ has gone in his love for us:

for better, for worse,  
for richer, for poorer,  
in sickness and in health,  
to love and to cherish,  
until we are parted by death.<sup>4</sup>

It is Christ's love, then, that will see a married couple through all these things, remaining faithful and fulfilled to the end.

So important is this, that some churches insist that couples, or at least one of the two, should belong to Christ through faith and baptism, if the church is going to be involved in officiating at their marriage ceremony. Some see this as the church saying they are not good enough to get married in the church without this. Believers in Christ see it otherwise. Some Christians, when they gather in the church fellowship, say words such as these:

We do not presume  
to come to your table, merciful Lord,  
trusting in our own righteousness,

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<sup>2</sup> Incident recounted by Geoffrey Bingham.

<sup>3</sup> *An Australian Prayer Book*, Anglican Information Office, Sydney, 1978, p. 548.

<sup>4</sup> *An Australian Prayer Book*, p. 550.

but in your manifold and great mercies.  
We are not worthy . . .  
But you are the same Lord  
whose nature is always to have mercy.<sup>5</sup>

It is Christ's action in cleansing us from all our sins that qualifies us to come to God. Without this, we will always be trying to prove ourselves, and we will never succeed or get it right.

The one thing I have needed to know, to be a good husband to my wife and a good father to my children, is the total forgiveness of sins from God—for myself first of all, and then also for my wife and my children. That way, neither I nor my wife or my children are stuck with the selfish mistakes I and they have made in our relationships—we are at every moment wondrously clean and free from them all, and able to live anew.

In the light of this, here is a prayer that can be prayed for the blessing of mutual love and faithfulness between a husband and a wife:

Almighty God,  
who by joining man and woman together  
taught us from the beginning  
that we should not separate what you have joined as one;  
we praise you that you have consecrated the state of matrimony to such an excellent purpose  
that in it is signified the spiritual marriage and unity between Christ and his Church.  
Look mercifully on these your servants,  
that this man may love his wife, according to your word,  
as Christ loved his bride the Church  
and gave himself for it,  
cherishing it as himself;  
and also that this woman may be loving and generous,  
responsive and faithful to her husband.  
O Lord, bless them both,  
and grant them to inherit your everlasting kingdom;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Question for discussion***

- *What one thing do we need to know to be good husbands and wives, parents and children?*

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<sup>5</sup> *An Australian Prayer Book*, p. 125.

<sup>6</sup> *An Australian Prayer Book*, p. 557.