

MARRIAGE AND THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD

Study One

WHY MARRIAGE?

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WHAT IS MARRIAGE?

Marriage is ‘the legal union of a man with a woman for life’. The word is also used for ‘the legal or religious ceremony that sanctions or formalises the decision of a man and a woman to live as husband and wife’.¹ Elements that make it a marriage, as distinct from other forms of union or relationship, are that it is between a man and a woman, by the consent and decision of both parties; it is recognised and affirmed by the wider community according to the law of the land, and it is witnessed to in a formal ceremony. These elements are common to humanity across most cultures.

In Australia, before a marriage is solemnised, an authorised marriage celebrant is required to say to the parties, in the presence of the witnesses:

‘Before you are joined in marriage in my presence and in the presence of these witnesses, I am to remind you of the solemn and binding nature of the relationship into which you are now about to enter.

‘Marriage, according to law in Australia, is the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life.’,
or words to that effect.²

This definition of marriage as ‘the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life’ was enshrined in the Act itself in an amendment passed by the Commonwealth Parliament in August 2004.³ This had the effect of forestalling attempts to include other relationships, such as those of same-sex couples, in the official definition of marriage.

This understanding of marriage has been influenced by Christian belief and practice, in that, for instance, it does not allow for polygamy or forced marriage. The introduction, in the 1975 Family Law Act, of ‘irretrievable breakdown’ (measured as a twelve months separation) as the single ground for divorce,⁴ put the law of the land at variance with a number of Christian positions on the lifelong nature of marriage. Nevertheless, Christian churches have

¹ *The Macquarie Dictionary*, Macquarie University, NSW, second edition, 1991, p. 1091.

² *Marriage Act 1961–1966*, 46. (1), Commonwealth of Australia, *Handbook for Marriage Celebrants*, Canberra, 1970 (?), p. 71.

³ David Phillips, ‘Marriage versus Civil Unions’, Festival of Light Australia Resource Paper, *Light*, August 2006, p. 8.

⁴ *Marriage, Divorce and the Family: New Rules for Australians: Questions and Answers on the 1975 Family Law Act*, CCH Australia Limited, 1975, p. 15.

generally seen marriage as a creational gift to the whole of humanity, believers and non-believers alike, and have recognised legal marriages whether solemnised in a Christian ceremony or not.

GOD AND MARRIAGE

In the Bible, marriage is seen in direct relationship with God. It is God who has created human beings male and female, and it is God who first brought the woman to be one with the man.⁵ Marriage is referred to as a ‘sacred covenant’ or ‘the covenant of . . . God’.⁶ Jesus declared that God is directly involved in the joining of a man and a woman in marriage:

Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate (Matthew 19:4–6; quoting Genesis 1:27; 2:24).

Not only that, but marriage is seen to be a reflection of the very purpose of God for His creation. The creation is to culminate in a union of Jesus Christ with his people, as of a husband with his bride. When Paul the apostle quotes Genesis 2:24, we expect him to say that it is referring to a husband and wife coming together in marriage. Paul, however comes up with something much larger than that:

‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:31–32).

Paul is saying that when God in the beginning invented marriage between a man and a woman, what God had in view was the relationship that would come to be in the end between Christ and his people. Every marriage is to be a reflection of, and a participation in, that great reality to come.

This could be why Jesus indicated that marriage between a man and a woman is for this life only, and not for the life to come:

For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage (Matthew 22:30).

Marriage is only ‘as long as we both shall live’ and ‘until we are parted by death’.⁷ It does not go on after that (which is why the remaining marriage partner is free to marry another when one of them dies), because God has got something even better than marriage lined up for us there, which our earthly marriages can in some measure reflect, participate in, and prepare us for here.

Given the vast dimensions of this understanding of marriage, it is little wonder that the Bible sees marriage as a wonderful mystery that is beyond our present understanding:

Three things are too wonderful for me;
four I do not understand:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a girl (Proverbs 30:18–19).

⁵ Genesis 1:27; 2:7, 21–22.

⁶ Proverbs 2:17, NRSV and RSV.

⁷ *An Australian Prayer Book*, Anglican Information Office, Sydney 1978, pp. 563, 550.

How does an eagle fly in mid air? How does a snake move without legs? How does a ship float and sail? None of these, after they have passed, leave a pathway that can be traced. Even more wonderful, and untraceable, is the relationship between women and men, especially in marriage. Couples who have been married for many years can still discover depths in each other and in their relationship that they have not known before. ‘We’ve been married fifty-five years,’ a friend said to me. ‘That’s wonderful’, I said. ‘My wife has dementia’, he said. ‘Even as it was coming on, I was given a new kind of love for her that no longer depends on what we are able to do together.’ I said, ‘You are being shown new dimensions of the love of God!’⁸ A ‘mystery’ in the Bible is a hidden truth, which is opened by God’s revelation to those humbly willing to receive and respond. The ‘great mystery’ of marriage, then, is not a puzzle to be solved, but a reality to be lived in.⁹

MARRIAGE IN AUSTRALIA

Big changes have happened in Australia over the last thirty years in the way marriage is appreciated and practiced. An obvious answer to the question, ‘Why marriage?’ can no longer be assumed. Thirty years ago, nearly 90% of Australians were married by the age of thirty; today more than half the people that age still have not committed to marriage. Some 76% of couples start off living together, up from only 16% thirty years ago. By the end of five years only half of those get married, and the rest go their separate ways. Over 40% of contemporary marriages are likely to end in divorce. Nearly 9% of marriages break down in the first five years. Second or later marriages now amount to 34%.¹⁰ Only 40% of marriages now happen in a religious ceremony.¹¹

While the legal definition of marriage still stands at the Commonwealth level, there is a concerted effort to gain marriage-type legal recognition for other forms of relationship, such as same-sex unions: to develop ‘nationally consistent state-based relationship recognition legislation that will include the opportunity for couples who have mutual commitment to a shared life to have those relationships registered and certified’.¹²

Lamentable as all this may be from the churches’ point of view, this is the situation as it is in Australia today, and people are getting used to it. To mount a rearguard action may be to close the door after the horse has bolted. To deplore the situation, and to castigate people for reasons they no longer understand, may not get much of a hearing. We need rather to be able to set out, clearly, positively and simply, the true nature and great benefits of God’s gift of marriage, to commend it to this generation. This we seek to do here.

⁸ Used with permission.

⁹ See Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Profound Mystery: Marriage Love, Divine and Human*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1995, p. 7; *The Glory of the Mystery and the Mystery of the Glory*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1998, pp. 1–5.

¹⁰ See Hugh Mackay, *Advance Australia . . . Where?*, Hachette Australia, Sydney, 2007, p. 163; Professor Alan Hayes, Australian Institute of Family Studies, *The Advertiser*, Adelaide, 20 Feb. 2008, p. 4.

¹¹ ‘Commencing in 1999, the proportion of marriages performed by civil celebrants has been greater than the proportion celebrated by ministers of religion. In 2004, 59% of all marriages were performed by civil celebrants. This compares to 40% back in 1984. The proportion of civil ceremonies was greatest in the Northern Territory at 75% and lowest in South Australia at 55%’ (Relationships Australia, *The Rest: Relationship Statistics*, vol. 52–October 2005, downloaded from: <<http://www.relationships.com.au/resources/pdfs/rest/trvol52.pdf>> accessed 27th February 2008).

¹² Australian Labor Party National Conference 2007; see ‘Myths and facts about relationship registers’, prepared by Festival of Light Australia, *Life News*, Nollamara WA, no. 98, June/July 2007 AD, p. 2. Such legislation was passed in Tasmania with the Relationships Act 2003 and, temporarily, in the Australian Capital Territory with the Civil Unions Act 2006, that was disallowed by the Commonwealth Government (David Phillips, *Light*, August 2006, p. 8).

MARRIAGE AND THE PURPOSE OF GOD

God's purpose in making the universe is most succinctly set out at the beginning of the apostle Paul's Letter to the Ephesians:

the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will (Ephesians 1:3–5).

The words 'adoption as his children' signify family; 'holy and blameless before him' promises a purity matching God's own; this all comes from and issues 'in love'. **Family, purity and love**, then, are God's purpose for us in creation, in and through our Lord Jesus Christ.

When we look at traditional Christian forms of the wedding service, we find that these match the reasons given there as to why God instituted marriage. We consider each of these in turn.

Family

God, as the one 'for whom and through whom all things exist', has the ultimate intention of 'bringing many children to glory' (Hebrews 2:10), as 'a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages', of whom God can say: 'I will be their God and they will be my children' (Revelation 7:9; 21:7). Those 'who are called according to his purpose' are 'predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family' (Romans 8:28–29). After his death and rising to life again, Jesus indicated that we can now know God as Father in the way he does (see John 20:17). In the end, the Son will be able to stand before the Father and say: 'Here am I and the children whom God has given me' (Hebrews 2:13).

God as eternal Father already has an eternal Son and an eternal Spirit, in full and wonderful relationship. But God was not content just to remain that way, full of Himself—that's not the way God is. God risked making a whole universe that is not Himself, so that there could be others that He could relate with, and who could relate with Him—who could come in on the wonderful family life that God already has in Himself, and be part of that glorious action.

In the marriage service, the first of the three purposes for which marriage was instituted by God is:¹³

for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.¹⁴

A more recent marriage service expresses it this way:

In marriage a new family is established in accordance with God's purpose, so that children may be born and nurtured in secure and loving care, for their well-being and instruction, and for the good order of society, to the glory of God.¹⁵

¹³ These three 'purposes' were commonplaces of mediaeval scholastic theology, and were expounded at length in early Calvinistic services. They were introduced into the English prayer book in 1549, and so were included in the Book of Common Prayer of 1662 (see Francis Proctor and Walter Howard Frere, *A New History of the Book of Common Prayer with a Rationale of Its Offices*, Macmillan, London, 1965, pp. 612–613). From there they have made their way, in various forms, into later marriage services. Here they are given in the original order: family, sexual purity, and loving companionship. More recent services have reversed this order, giving priority to loving companionship and the sexual relationship, with family issuing from that.

¹⁴ 'The Form of the Solemnization of Matrimony' in *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1662.

Married couples who launch into having a family find that life can't be simple any more, and it can get messy. They are no longer in absolute control of everything. There are other persons, with wills of their own, that they now have to reckon with. The couple can no longer live just full of themselves—there are other people that they need to give themselves out to.

God was happy with that when He took the risk of creating others beside Himself. That's the way God is. That is part of what being a family is all about. The 'solid joys and lasting treasure'¹⁶ of good family relationships make it all worthwhile.

Purity

God's purpose is that 'in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless' (Philippians 1:10). This purity will match that of Christ himself:

What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (1 John 3:2–3).

'Holiness' denotes the strong and substantial purity of God Himself. Those who belong in relationship with God are enjoined:

You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy (Leviticus 19:2).

As the rest of Leviticus 19 shows, this issues in very thoughtful care and practical service of God and others.

The intention of the Father in Ephesians 1:4 that we should be 'holy and blameless before him' is matched by the determined action of the Son in Ephesians 5:25–27 that we 'may be holy and without blemish' as his bride.

Purity does not mean that we just keep ourselves from being tainted or defiled. It is much more positive than that. Purity is being single-minded towards the one thing that is good, to the exclusion of other lesser things. This operates in our relationship with God first of all: God has said, 'I am the LORD your God . . . you shall have no other gods before [or *besides*] me' (Exodus 20:2). So Jesus said 'Blessed are the pure in heart'—those who are single-minded towards God—'for they shall see God' (Matthew 5:8).

In the area of sexuality, then, purity means we keep ourselves only for the person we are going to marry, to be able to give ourselves wholly to that one person. Marriage gives us that focus on the one other person with whom we are going to share this unique and special relationship, and keeps us in it, to discover more of the depths and the amazing wonder of being in relationship with another human being at this profound level. The Bible is clear on the importance of this single-minded focus, both before and during marriage:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness (1 Thessalonians 4:3–7).

Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers (Hebrews 13:4).

¹⁵ *An Australian Prayer Book*, 1978, p. 561.

¹⁶ John Newton, 'Glorious things of thee are spoken', *New Creation Hymn Book*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2001, no. 162, v. 4. Compare Proverbs 17:17: 'A friend loves at all times, and kinsfolk are born to share adversity'. Also Hebrews 12:2, where 'Jesus . . . for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross'.

This then opens and holds the way clear for a married couple in freedom to plumb the depths of a constant, faithful and life-long relationship:

Drink water from your own cistern,
 flowing water from your own well.
Should your springs be scattered abroad,
 streams of water in the streets?
Let them be for yourself alone,
 and not for sharing with strangers.
Let your fountain be blessed,
 and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
 a lovely deer, a graceful doe.
May her breasts satisfy you at all times;
 may you be intoxicated always by her love (Proverbs 5:15–19).

Marriage, gladly accepted and engaged in, also holds us secure from the perils of undisciplined foolishness:

Why should you be intoxicated, my son, by another woman
 and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?
For human ways are under the eyes of the LORD,
 and he examines all their paths.
The iniquities of the wicked ensnare them,
 and they are caught in the toils of their sin.
They die for lack of discipline,
 and because of their great folly they are lost (Proverbs 5:20–23).

Many wonder these days not only at the wisdom but also at the possibility of anyone remaining sexually chaste outside of marriage, or even within it. Christian churches are tempted to abandon the Biblical standards to accommodate these views. However, the situation today with regard to sexual morality would appear to be little different from that which prevailed in the first century of the Christian era, against which this apparently new and strange morality of purity and holiness was established. The churches would do well to acknowledge gladly that the Biblical standards are different from those that prevail around us, and we should be content to be cheerfully counter-cultural.

The second purpose given in the marriage service picks up the matter of sexual purity. ‘Marriage is a lifelong union in which a man and a woman are called . . . to give themselves [to each other] in body, mind and spirit’—that is, wholly. Modern marriage services are strangely coy in giving expression to this. They speak of ‘the proper expression of natural instincts and affections’ with which God has endowed us, or of living ‘a chaste and holy life, as befits members of Christ’s body’.¹⁷ The older marriage service came straight out with it in an earthy way: marriage ‘was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication’.¹⁸ Marriage stands against the impure promiscuous distribution of sex: it is a lifelong union, to the exclusion of all others. It is pure: single-mindedly focussed on the one thing that is good.

Many years ago, late at night on the black and white television, I saw a movie film that I would love to see again, if I could identify it. The whole of the action took place in a botanical garden, as the only two characters, a young man and a young woman, walked with each other through its various settings. It was evident that the young man was wanting to have his way sexually with the young woman. The beautiful young woman clearly loved him, but was firmly and serenely resisting and denying his advances. When it finally dawned on

¹⁷ *An Australian Prayer Book*, 1978, pp. 560, 548.

¹⁸ ‘The Form of the Solemnization of Matrimony’ in *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1662.

the young man that she did not want just what he wished for, but wanted to be with him for the rest of his life, and to give herself wholly to him for the rest of her life, and that she was keeping herself for this far greater thing for his sake, he could scarcely believe that she actually loved him like that, and he was blown away by the joy and excitement of it.

Love

In Ephesians 1:4–5 it is not easy to know whether Paul meant that it was in love that the Father destined us to be His children, or that it is in love that we will be holy and blameless before Him. It can be translated either way. Both are true: God's purpose for us comes from the Father's love, and will issue in us loving. The Bible is also clear that the love of which we are speaking, including the love with which we love, comes from God, and does not originate in us:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love (1 John 4:7–8).

It is this love for which we have been made: to be loved by God, to love God who loves, and so to love one another as God loves:

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Matthew 22:37–39).

It is in this love that God gave of Himself to judge and redeem a world that had turned against His love:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3:16).

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:9–10).

This love came to us while we were still opposed to God:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly . . . God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us . . . while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son (Romans 5:6, 8, 10).

The love of God with which we love, then, includes love for those opposed to us:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous (Matthew 5:44–45).

This love is especially pertinent to marriage. Without a love like that, how can two different persons—both of them sinners—sustain a lifelong relationship at depth? Marriage is the prime testing ground where these key matters of forgiveness and reconciliation in love are to be worked through in practical ways. And they are:

Almost 60 percent of marriages will never trouble the Family Court. Although this is a smaller proportion than it used to be, it's a relatively stable majority: the official divorce rate does not appear to be rising, and may yet fall as a consequence of the falling marriage rate. Many of those marriages don't

merely survive; they thrive. Some couples find that if it wasn't quite 'happily ever after' for them, their marriage has brought benefits, joys and gratifications that come very close to that. When it works brilliantly, marriage can be experienced as blissful human harmony. When it works even tolerably well, it can be a source of deep physical and emotional comfort, reliable friendship and shared experience that creates the powerful bond of a common history and the prospect of companionship into old age. A couple committed to their marriage running its full course (and that's the expectation of most married people) draw strength from the security of knowing they can rely on each other, trust each other and be open and relaxed with each other.

Only a dreamer would ask for a stress-free marriage (or, indeed, a stress-free life). Only a fool would expect perfection in human affairs, including marriage. But those in long-term committed marriages typically report that when the romance fades and the relationship settles down to the long haul of conjugal love characterised by mutual support, encouragement, respect and affection, the rewards are incalculable. Minor irritations? Yes, often. Occasional strong words? Yes. Disagreements? Of course. Even murderous fury, sometimes. But a stable, fulfilling marriage remains, for most Australians, a dream that either has, or might, come true.¹⁹

The third purpose given in the marriage service speaks of the lifelong outworking of this practical love:

It was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.²⁰

Marriage is: 'to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, as long as we both shall live'—a true reflection of God's love for us all.²¹

Thus a Christian description of marriage could fill out the bare requirements of the legal definition by adding significantly: 'the union *in mutual love* of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life'.

GOD'S PURPOSE UNDER ATTACK

Marriage, then, relates to the purpose of God for His creation at these fundamental levels: family, purity and love. The Bible says that God's purpose for the creation has come under attack from the beginning of the human race. Beguiled by 'that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world' (Revelation 12:9), we have taken it upon ourselves to formulate and enact our own purposes, deciding for ourselves what is right or wrong, without reference to God (see Genesis 3; compare Isaiah 14:12–15; Ezekiel 28:1–2, 11–19).

Since marriage is so closely aligned with the purpose of God, a central consequence of this is that marriage itself comes under attack. Marriage stands as a constant practical witness to the glorious purpose of God. For those who are still intent on their own purposes, this is a constant affront. Those who are opposed to going God's way will particularly find ways of avoiding, getting around, or perverting marriage, to remove or do despite to this offence. The apostle Paul points out that this is indeed the case, when he speaks of 'those who by their wickedness suppress the truth', such that sexual immorality and homosexual practice—anything that is *not* marriage—come to be favoured in preference to the real thing:

¹⁹ Hugh Mackay, *Advance Australia . . . Where?*, pp. 182–183.

²⁰ 'The Form of the Solemnization of Matrimony' in *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1662.

²¹ *An Australian Prayer Book*, 1978, pp. 563, 562.

though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools . . . God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done . . . They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them (Romans 1:21–22, 24–28, 32).

From this it is apparent that the desire for 'options' may not be as neutral or as innocent as it seems to be, but may, even unconsciously, be operating from a more sinister agenda.

The heartening thing—though it may not appear to be so—is that those who attempt to operate this way are still not in final control of their own destiny. Paul says that those who indulge in these things do so because they have been given over to them by God, in the action of God's wrath (see Rom. 1:18, 24, 26, 28). God's wrath is the pressure of God's holy love against evil and sin. And we know that the love of God that judges is also the love that saves, cleanses, purifies and redeems.

WE NEED ALL THE HELP WE CAN GET

As a result of both our own shortcomings and the attacks that are mounted from other quarters, marriage is not always easy, and we do not always get it right. With regard to family: I know a young wife who once said, 'I used to think I was a nice person—until I had children!' Sometimes they bring out the worst in us. What about purity? Being married does not stop temptation from coming our way and, in our thoughts at least, faithfulness is not something we are always good at. As for love: it is not hard to see that our own so-called love can run out. It can even turn to hatred. Staying married is a real triumph in these days of a 40% divorce rate. It is not easy. We need all the help we can get.

That is why it is good to see couples still asking the churches for a Christian marriage ceremony. Not just to have the help and support of family and friends, but for the church together with them to ask God for the help they need in their marriage. Especially in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. When God designed marriage to fit with His purposes for the universe, it was our Lord Jesus Christ that He especially had in mind. His eternal Son who, in God our Father's great love for us, has become one with us—our own flesh and bone—and in love has embraced us into himself, with all the worst that is in us, all the offences we have committed against each other; all our selfish unfaithfulness; all the sins that mostly we can do nothing to put right; all our lack of love—to take us with all of that to the death on the cross that we rightly deserve, but to bear it for us, and take us with him out the other side when he mightily rose from death, to bring us back to God our Father in the family, the purity and the love for which we have been made.

What God has done there in Jesus, and being in that ourselves, is what marriage is all about. Jesus is our true husband, and we who belong to him are his glorious bride. A husband is to love his wife like Jesus loves us. A wife is to love her husband as we would love our Lord Jesus Christ. They can both do that by belonging to Jesus by faith—now, and in the age to come. This is where we see God's ultimate purpose for the universe.

JESUS AT A MARRIAGE

One of the older marriage services reminds us that ‘Christ adorned and beautified matrimony with his presence, and with the first sign by which he revealed his glory, at the marriage in Cana of Galilee’.²² Here is the account of it:

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’ His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, ‘Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.’ So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.’ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him (John 2:1–11).

On the face of it, this was a caring and generous provision to save the family from shame and help the wedding to be a good one. It is indeed a miracle, but one that happens all the time: God is constantly turning water into wine—every time rain falls on the vineyards of the Barossa Valley! Here the process was simply short-circuited or speeded up. The Creator of all things is at work in Jesus. We are impressed by the amount of wine: 160–180 gallons (730–820 litres)! This testifies to the abundant generosity of God. Jesus is no party-pooper. It is real wine, that is given ‘to gladden the human heart’ (Psalm 104:15), and is of excellent quality.

Jesus never did something just for the sake of doing it, but always as a ‘sign’ to point to something else: the coming of God’s kingdom. We can give a spiritualised interpretation of this event, such as: ‘Jesus takes our lives which are dull and flat and tasteless like water and turns them into something rich and fruity and full-bodied like wine!’ So have I preached, but that may not be the point of it at all. We can make the connections with the ‘new wine’ that is the fruit of Jesus’ ministry, that does not fit into the old wine-skins (see Luke 5:33–39), or with the ‘cup’ of his death and the wine of the kingdom-banquet that will follow (see Matthew 26:27–29). But these connections may be a little ingenious and far-fetched. John simply says that in this happening Jesus ‘revealed his glory’ to those who were able to see it and believe. This ‘glory’, John has said in John 1:14, is ‘the glory as of the Father’s only Son’. Here is the Son, coming to do the Father’s will (see Hebrews 10:5, 7). What has he come for? It is not by coincidence that John the Baptist shortly says of Jesus: ‘He who has the bride is the bridegroom’ (John 3:29), or that Jesus later told stories about ‘a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son’ (Matthew 22:2). Jesus has come for a wedding! The Bridegroom is coming for his Bride—ready or not! This is God’s ultimate purpose for His universe. So Jesus began his ministry with this ‘sign’—at a wedding. What a way to start!

²² *An Australian Prayer Book*, 1978, p. 548.