

***Hallelujah!* – Revelation 19: 6-10 & John 2: 1-11**
Online Sermon by Rev Phil Wootton for Sunday 24 January 2021

“Hallelujah! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.” ‘Hallelujah’ is the song of heaven, the chorus of angels, the sound of glory. ‘Hallelujah’ may not be a word that springs to our lips very often right now: it’s not how we feel about our current circumstances. It is a word from beyond the present: it’s like the sound of distant church bells, or the roar of a waterfall: you hear long before you see. The hallelujahs of heaven are like the future skipping back to us through time. The hallelujahs of our hymns in church represent our response in faith to a future we can only begin to imagine.

The word ‘hallelujah’ is a transliteration from Hebrew, and simply means ‘Praise the Lord’. ‘Hallel’ is ‘praise’ and ‘jah’ as the start of JHWH, the LORD. ‘Hallelujah’ (as a word) does not appear in the New Testament until the 19th chapter of Revelation – that’s a long wait, 26 books and 18 chapters, to be precise. But it’s definitely worth waiting for. This is the climax of the whole story, the conclusion, the culmination, the consummation. The marriage of Christ the Lamb of God with his bride the church. The Bible’s story began with the separation between human beings and God through the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden. It draws to a close as Jesus, the Lamb who was slain, begins his reign, not alone but with his church as consort: God and humanity in union, for all eternity. Hallelujah!

This ‘Hallelujah’ does seem a long time coming! It hardly appears to fit the reality of the world we live in, or at least, it means living by faith rather than by sight for an awfully long time. The Book of Revelation understands this. The visions of St John (although interspersed with glimpses of heaven) tell of wave after wave of destruction. For, what we read in Revelation is not confined to future ‘end times’: it’s the story of humanity told in the brightest of colours and starkest of terms. John sees, for example, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, bringing war, famine, plague and death on earth – and who can deny this is the feel of reality in the world we know?

In chapter 18, immediately before our passage today, he tells of Babylon, depicted as ‘the great prostitute’ riding a great beast. She has seduced the world through the love of wealth and parade of luxury, underpinned by corruption, exploitation, and unjust trade. Evil will not easily give up its tenacious grip, and when the reckoning comes, there will be awful destruction. But evil will fall, and instead of the ‘whore of Babylon’ will stand the Bride of Christ. In place of the harlot’s gaudy dress, the Bride will wear a robe of fine linen, bright and clean, which is made up of the righteous deeds of God’s people. Finally, after all the struggle and fight, Christ, the Lamb of God, will take his church in his arms, and heaven and earth unite in worship. Hallelujah!

Such visions may be too much for us to take on board, too grand for our tiny brains. That’s why God shows himself in Jesus, humble man on earth. Epiphany, as the name suggests, is the season for revelations, earthly events that provide the merest hints of the glory that is to come.

And so, we are told in John's Gospel, on the third day Jesus, his mother, brothers and disciples went to a wedding at Cana in Galilee. Weddings give us a point of connection. We can all imagine being at a wedding. We feel we know what's going on (although we shouldn't forget wedding customs vary enormously across history). So, I find it interesting that the actual point of connection John makes for us isn't in the wonderful celebration, or the happiness of or love between bride and groom; it's in the fear of something going wrong. We can all imagine that! Everyone wants to make the it a perfect day, the best day of their lives for the couple. But we know all too well that very desire for perfection causes enormous stress. We all know, in human affairs, things go wrong. And in this wedding the thing that went wrong is that wine ran out. Disaster. Social stigma. Instead of the day being remembered for the honour of the new married status conferred on this man and woman, it will be recalled for the shame of their having failed to cater for their guests. Well, of course, we know this is when Jesus stepped in and saved the day. Hallelujah!

This, the first miracle Jesus performed, causes some people problems. While many of us are really happy to quote it as evidence that Jesus loved a party, others find it a bit beneath him – demeaning. I remember a few years ago someone I spoke to, wanting to demonstrate his reasons for lacking faith, turned to this miracle to explain himself. 'Why would Jesus consider this the most important thing he could do with the power of being God's Son? It seems frivolous.'

Questions like these explain why we have to look beneath the surface. If we only focus on the everyday, which we can associate with, we'll miss the glory that lies behind it. John gives the clue at the end of the story: 'This was the first of the miraculous signs Jesus performed ... He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.' Jesus had asked the servants to fill the water jars – not ones which you'd drink water from but ones for ritual washing. That meant the jars were huge – holding at least 120 gallons in total – but also of symbolic importance. The old law was very clear in its stipulations about when and how you needed to wash to be ritually pure. It's this water Jesus takes hold of and transforms into new wine, again symbolically important, as representative of the Holy Spirit and the new age of the Messiah's reign. Once you see it like this, immediately new dimensions come into view. We recognise Jesus taking hold of all that is old and stale and tired in our own lives, and transforming it into something new and wonderful and fresh and fruitful. A tiny bit of heaven on earth: 'Hallelujah' breaks in!

The story of the Bible is of God's new creation – not destroying the old, but renewing it. It is the story of God and humanity coming back together – the marriage of Christ and his church. Our attention is taken much more by what's on the news – war, famine, plague and death. But we live by faith, not by sight; we join daily the battle against evil, and don't give up; and we tune our ears to the wedding bells of heaven that do chime in our hearing, even through the tumult of the present age. Hallelujah! Amen.