

Lesson 8: Revelation 19

Opening Question: What is the best celebration you've ever been to (wedding, sports team success, graduation party) and what made it so great?

Opening Prayer: The Church is the bride of Christ! Forgive us when we contribute to making the bride anything less than beautiful. Call us again to investing in our local congregations so that we can prepare the Bride for her wedding day! Amen.

Read aloud Revelation 19:1-16

Read Wright:

In the strange new world of postmodern Britain, weddings are still highly popular, but they are also highly expensive. So much so, in fact, that it is now the norm rather than the exception for couples to live together for some years, intending to get married, but finding that in order to afford the kind of spectacle they have been led to expect they have to save up. Even in areas of relative poverty, people still spend tens of thousands of pounds to stage something that seems appropriate to the occasion.

There is much about this modern custom that I find sad. It feeds commercial interests, and gives to the ceremony itself a flavor which is out of keeping with its real meaning. But at another level I regard it as an affirmation of something profoundly true about what it means to be human. We are, after all, made male and female in God's image, and in Genesis that is the climax of the whole story of creation. For a man and a woman to come together in marriage, whether they know it or not, is to plant a signpost which says: God's creation is wonderful! God's purposes for it are not over! His plan is going ahead, and we are part of it! Theologians down the ages have always seen the promises made at a wedding, promises of faithfulness through thick and thin, as a proper reflection of God's promises to his world, to the human race, and to his own people in particular. A wedding, then, is a glorious symbol. Even when people enter upon it with no thought of God, and with an eye only for the dress, the photographs and the wine, it remains powerful.

All of that is in the background of the great reversal which now takes place in the book of Revelation. The whore has been judged; the bride steps forward. The glossy, glitzy world of Babylon has been overthrown; God's people emerge, with shining, pure linen to wear as God's own gift. The marriage of the lamb and his bride is to be the focal point of the marriage of heaven and earth themselves, and Babylon, the symbolic equivalent of the ancient Babel which thought to climb up to heaven by its own energy, is shown up as a futile parody of the real thing, a human attempt to get, by sheer greed, what God proposed to give by sheer grace (167-168).

The idea of such a wedding goes back, of course, to the ancient Jewish tradition of Israel's as YHWH's bride – wooed in the wilderness, married at Sinai, unfaithful for many generations and eventually cast away, but then wooed and won all over again in a covenant renewal that would result in the renewal of the whole creation (Isaiah 54–55). The whole of the Song of Songs, though at one level simply a spectacular poem of erotic love, has been seen by Jewish and Christian commentators alike as an allegory of the love between God and his people (for Christians, Christ and his people). Now this glorious theme comes to a spectacular completion, and is joined with another ancient theme of celebration: God's great feast, the banquet to which he will invite all and sundry (Isaiah 25.6–10) (169).

Optional Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the image of a wedding comes up repeatedly in scripture?
2. How can we ready the bride (the Church of Christ) to be beautiful for the wedding day?

Read Revelation 19:17-21

Wright says:

One of the central tasks facing a Messiah, it seems, is that he would have to fight the decisive battle against Israel's enemies, both the pagan hordes who were always coming in fresh waves to overwhelm God's people, and the renegades within Israel who were colluding with their pagan masters and corrupting the pure life of God's people. This would then go hand in hand with the task of purifying the people's worship by renewing or restoring the Temple. It is because Jesus showed no sign of being a military leader, and because he showed no interest in cleaning up the Temple, that many said then, and many have said since, that he couldn't have been in any sense thinking of himself as 'Messiah'.

But this is to forget just how radical Jesus' own redefinition of the Jewish expectation seems to have been. Throughout his public career he took as his main theme the belief which John has been celebrating on and off throughout Revelation: the kingdom of God. 'The kingdom of the world has passed to our Lord and his Messiah.' 'Alleluia! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, has become king!' These statements are, of course, linked directly to statements about the victory of Jesus. Jesus himself spoke of victory - but it was not the victory one might expect, over the forces of Rome. Indeed, when others wanted to fight Rome, he hinted strongly if strangely that this was missing the proper target. The true enemy was the dark power that stood behind Rome and all other pagan empires. Jesus spoke about fighting a battle with the real enemy, the satan,

the one who had led all humanity, Israel included, into rebellion against the creator God. And Jesus seems to have believed that the ultimate way to fight this true battle was by giving up his life.

It is this that explains the military imagery of the present passage. Once more, this is symbolic language, truly pointing to a reality which lies beyond it. It would be as much a mistake to suppose (as some, sadly, have done) that this passage predicts, and legitimates in advance, an actual military battle between followers of Jesus and followers of other gods as it would be to suppose that the reality which corresponds to the monster that comes up from the sea is an actual physical creature with the heads, horns and so on described in chapter 12. The victory here is a victory over all pagan power, which means a victory over violence itself. The symbolism is appropriate because it is taken directly from the passages which speak most powerfully, and are most regularly referred to in the New Testament, of the triumph of the Messiah: Isaiah 11, where the Messiah will judge the nations with the sword of his mouth; Psalm 2, where he will rule them with a rod of iron; Isaiah 63, where he will tread the winepress of the wrath of God. As John's readers know well by now, the actual weapons which Jesus uses to win the battle are his own blood, his loving self-sacrifice:

With tears he fights, and wins the field
His naked breast stands for a shield
His battering shot are babish cries,
His arrows made of weeping eyes.
His martial ensigns cold and need,
And feeble flesh his warrior's steed (172-174).

Optional Discussion Questions

As we study this book, the United States is choosing a new leader. One temptation for the Church is to imagine that an earthly political leader will ensure the place and power of the Church, and so church leaders can be tempted to align themselves with political leaders because of the attraction of power. In reading Revelation, we are reminded that the victory is won not through earthly or militaristic power, but through the sacrifice of the lamb.

1. Why are we tempted to see earthly leaders as our saviors?
2. How can we correct that in our own lives and in the life of the Christian church?

Closing Prayer:

Forgive us, Lord, when we put our hope in human leaders and believe that our primary citizenship is in our earthly nations. Remind us that we are citizens of heaven, and our only hope is you. As we long for the new heaven and the new earth, help us to ready your Bride, the Church, for the wedding feast of the Lamb, the day when all earthly powers will be swept away, and all will know that you are King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Amen.