

## Introduction

Dear brothers and sisters,

It's Sunday #3 in our Vision 2030 series. We began with "Loving God" and then, last week, "Loving our community". Today we consider "Loving the church". But first, let's get our terms right.

We live in a time when most people don't go to church and don't read Bibles. It's very likely that when you mention the word "church", the first thing they think of is the building at the end of Riverbank Place. But it's hard to love a building isn't it?

This morning, when we hear the word "church", think firstly of it being "the Big-C church" ie the one holy, universal Church; the one people that God has gathered through the ages, from all nations, and saved by his grace. These are his people, saved by grace through faith in Jesus, the people for whom Christ died. Then there is the "small-c" church, the local body of believers, who gather week by week. That's our focus this morning – *us, at Riverbank*. And our Vision is: to love not just the "big-C" church. But also, to love the "little-c" church, us at Riverbank.

Sometimes that's hard isn't it? You can work hard and serve the church, but people can be negative and critical, and hurt you. The Church Council makes a decision and you think it's a bad one. A pastor can preach a poor sermon. You might the songs in the service are woeful. And there are many people who have been hurt by the church – some of them deeply. You may be one of them.

So... Why should we love the church? *Because Jesus does*. That's the best reason I can think of. The church is his bride. He knows she's not perfect. He sees all her warts and all her wrinkles. But he loves her anyway. That's why he gave up his life for her. Most of us have made sacrifices for those we love. But which husband here has loved his bride this much?

That's why our Vision – to love the church – is so very important. To help us, let's fast-forward in time to the day of the wedding. It's the wedding of the Lamb, Jesus Christ, and his bride, the church. It's a striking scene in Rev 19. The Lord God Almighty is on the throne. The Great Prostitute, Babylon, the symbol of Rome with all her immorality, and her seductive focus on wealth and luxury, has fallen. Four times the shout of Hallelujah bursts out. Now the focus shifts to the bride of Christ walking down the aisle to marry her bridegroom.

Did you notice that it's a *unique* wedding. For the first time in history there is a perfect bridegroom. A perfect bride. And once they marry, they will begin a new life together – and will truly live happily ever after!

This morning we will look, firstly, at some Background. Secondly, we will go to the Wedding. Then we need to put this all together and "put some legs under our Vision".

## BACKGROUND

Did you know that Rev 19 is not the first time we come across a wedding? This theme of "bride and bridegroom" – the Lord and his people – is right through the Bible.

In the OT, you'll find it in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea. Here is one example: Isaiah 54:5 For your Maker *is your husband*— the Lord Almighty is his name— the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth. Here God is the husband. He has chosen his bride,

the nation Israel. However, she is an unfaithful, adulterous bride. She worships false gods and sets her love on others. She is an unworthy bride, who brings much grief and pain to her Husband. *But he loves her anyway.*

In the NT, Jesus calls himself the bridegroom. Weddings pop up in his teaching and parables: Think of the 5 wise and foolish bridesmaids (Matt 25:1-13). Or the Parable of the Wedding banquet, where a King hosted a banquet for his Son. But the invited guests rejected the invitation. So, others were called to join the party. (Mt 22:1-14).

Why is this? Why does Jesus focus on weddings?... it reminds us of God's great love for his people. It reminds us of the big day that is coming, a day of amazing joy and celebration. And we need to be ready for that! It helps us understand that human history, and our world, will not end in a nuclear holocaust. Or because of global warming. It will be a wedding!

Further on in the NT, the apostle Paul speaks of Christ and his bride in Eph 5:25b-27. There we see that Christ died for his bride. And that Christ is at work in his bride. And one day he will finish the job: on the wedding day, she will be "a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish but holy and blameless".

That's the background. The bride and bridegroom theme is right through the Bible. So, *why should we love the Church?* Because Jesus does. It's his bride. That raises a **Question**: Do you love what Jesus loves / Riverbank church?...

As you think on this, let's go to the wedding day.

## THE WEDDING

Two things grab our attention. The first is the noise; it's loud and it's joyful! The second is what the bride is wearing. That's what people often ask about isn't it? What was she wearing?... Well, there has never been anything like this dress!

A) As we listen in on this wedding, what do we hear? It's in vss 6,7 "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. <sup>7</sup>Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Paul Tripp comments here: "They are *not* saying 'I got the job. My marriage is fantastic. My kids turned out well. I defeated depression. I mastered my fears'".

They are rejoicing because the Lord God Almighty is on the throne. His plan of salvation has been accomplished. Jesus, the King, has gathered a people who love him. They are his bride. They live under his rule. They follow him in faith. They have sacrificed and suffered. And lived for his glory. Now, the Big day has come. The waiting is over. The wedding day has come. The bridegroom is there. And they rejoice, loudly!

B) As we look on this scene, what is the bride wearing? VS 8 "Fine linen, bright and clean was given her to wear. the finest of linen. Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people". Jesus has given his bride a beautiful wedding dress - the pure white clothes of his righteousness. It is a massively expensive gift. It cost him everything. He lived and died so that he could buy this for her. He rose and he rules and will return so that he can give it to her.

Try to picture the scene: You, clothed in his righteousness. As pure, as holy, as beautiful, as lovely as he is. Can you believe it! It's almost too good to be true. All your sin / failings / brokenness / shame / tears - *gone*. All the pain. All the guilt of the past - *gone*!

That's not all: You are not there as an invited guest. You are not even a bridesmaid. *You are the bride!* You are wearing that dress. Jesus looks into your eyes and says to you: "You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen". And he will not be exaggerating.

Maybe today you are gripped by a particular sin that you cannot break from. Maybe your marriage has fallen far short of God's good plan. Maybe you are still carrying around the guilt, or pain, of past relationships. Or maybe painful and terrible things have been done to you. Maybe you know that you need to change, that you are far from perfect.

The good news is: There is hope! Jesus promises here that change is possible. And help can be yours. But it all depends on one thing. You must acknowledge that you cannot make it happen. You cannot make yourself righteous. You need him to give this to you. You need his perfect and finished work on the cross. You must believe that he died for your sin. And rose for your salvation.

Then, turn to him in faith. Perhaps for the first time in your life. Perhaps for the umpteenth time. Come back to him. Confess your sin to him. Receive him as your Saviour, if you have not already. He has rest for the weary. He has love for the broken heart. He has grace and forgiveness; mercy and healing. And he will meet you wherever you are. He wants, above all else, for *you* to be at the wedding. And have *you* as his bride.

Jesus loves the church. He died so he could marry her. Do you love what he loves?... Because that's our Vision.

But now: What can help us to **CATCH THE VISION?** What will help us put legs under this Vision? Two things are important. The first is that we must

3A) **Look into the mirror.** One of the things sin does is give us laser sharp vision - a very clear focus on - the sins and faults in others. But it makes us blind to our own. Jesus said in MATT 7:3 "why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye - but do not see the log in your own?"

All of us should look into the mirror and ask: AM I PART OF THE PROBLEM - OR PART OF THE SOLUTION?... Am I greeting new people and making them feel welcome? Am I giving sacrificially to support the church and its ministries? Am I making the effort to show hospitality to people I don't know? Do I pray for the church more than I criticize it? If I have an issue, do I raise it humbly with those who can do something about it? AM I PART OF THE PROBLEM - OR PART OF THE SOLUTION?

But more needs to be done. We also need to 3B) **Love one another.** We read in 1 John 4:9-11:

<sup>9</sup>This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup>This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Dear friends, *since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

That won't always be easy. But it is vital - because this is the way of God's gospel grace. We received his love when we did not deserve it. Now we, in turn, spread it to others.

May I share what has helped me in the times when I've been hurt and it's hard to love a brother or sister in Christ: I pray for thick skin and a big heart. Jesus loved me when I was not lovable. By his grace I can - and should - do the same to others. Also, I have had to learn the lesson of "learning from my critics". It may be that 90% of what they say is wrong. I try to identify the 10% that is right. And work on that.

As we think on our Vision, we need to ask: What will happen if we *don't* give ourselves to this?... It's an important question. The stakes are very high. If we don't love the church, it's very likely that our kids won't either. Also, our Vision for outreach will grow hazy. And in time it's very possible that there will be no church. That would be a tragic outcome.

Let's look at the opposite scenario. If we *do grasp this Vision*, and work at it, what can we look forward to? Under God's blessing we can expect that the power of God through his Gospel will create a church that is *"altogether different (from anything in) in the world today... churches that are God-exalting, Christ-admiring, convenience-defying, cross-embracing, risk-taking, selfishness-crucifying, gossip-silencing, prayer-saturated, future-thinking, outward reaching and beautifully human congregations where the undeserving can thrive. Only God can build this new kind of community. But when he does it cannot be ignored"*. (R Ortlund, The Gospel, quoting John Piper, p77).

By the grace of God, we will create a new community. In a generation searching for identity and belonging, people will see something attractive. The same book quoted above spoke of a single mum who enjoyed coming to church for the simple reason "it was the first time she had met men who were not cruel".

When Jesus looks at Riverbank, he sees our sins and failings. He sees all our warts and all our wrinkles. But he also sees us as his bride. It's a lesson he has taught us right through the Bible. And he shows us where it will end in the beautiful wedding scene in Rev 19. Now he wants us to join him there. Let's look into the mirror. Let's hear his call to us to "love one another". Let's see the church – Riverbank, us – like he does, through grace-filled eyes. Let's give ourselves to this and grasp the Vision to "love the church".

Why should we love the church? The best reason I can think of is that Jesus does. Will you join us in that Vision? Amen.