

I have a pet theory which I can trot out anytime I think its relevant or people might like to engage in my propositions. It's to do with the language and the expressions we use in church.

Like any specialist organisation we have our own unique language around our theology, liturgy, scriptures, hymns. We use words like sanctify and justify and redeemed.

Our worship echoes the ancient Psalms – so if we sing “As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you” we're singing a line from Psalm 42 – but where else would you express yourself in those terms?

Can you put the kettle on, I'm as parched as the deer that pants for water!

Our specialist language – if we are not careful - can make it difficult for those unfamiliar with church speak to grasp what's going on. We can be oblivious to the strangeness of what we are actually saying.

It shouldn't be too surprising to find someone coming into faith, church life, our community, asking questions about what we say because it is a strange use of language.

Almighty God, we thank you for feeding us with the body and blood of your Son Jesus Christ.
Through Him we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice....

When you hear it afresh and out of the flow of worship you have to admit it's strange. It carries deep meaning and is frequently poetic, but it's a specialist language none the less – now my pet theory is around gender and how the character of the church is shaped by language which is NOT the topic for this morning, but I've given this introduction because even though I

am an insider and it's familiar language to me, I have to admit that I don't readily find the language of Christ and His Bride easy language to use or adopt or think about. There are parables throughout the New Testament picking up this metaphor (for example the 10 virgins waiting for the bridegroom, five foolish with no spare oil for their lamps, five wise. By the time the foolish ones return from getting oil the bridegroom has come, the wedding has begun and they are shut out).

Because that parable is about being prepared, I can sort of ignore the imagery of the marriage – in our NT reading it's used clearly.

The idea of a marriage relationship being used to explore the relationship of God and his people is used frequently in the Old Testament.

The metaphor is used of a broken relationship. In the one we had today Isaiah is suggesting that for a brief while God, like a husband, abandoned Israel (his wife) due to his anger but now with great compassion God will again show everlasting love and compassion on the nation.

Isaiah is speaking of the exile when Israel was carted off to Babylon and it felt as if God had abandoned them, but now God will gather them again and demonstrate his love for them.

The metaphor of a marriage and the difficulties of relationships is something all of us are familiar with either directly or indirectly. We know only too well the trials and tribulations of friends and family.

So far – yes, I can see how marriage allows us to understand something of God's longing for a deep lasting relationship with His people...but when we get to the New Testament and into it's last book Revelation then the vision that St.John presents us

Love, Christ and the Church

with is a new Marriage scenario – the wedding of the Lamb to his bride.

It's here that the language and images are ones I have to work at to stick with what St. John is implying.

The Lamb is of course Jesus Christ and that way of describing him has very ancient roots. A lamb was slaughtered before the Angel of death passed over the Israelites and Egyptians and unless the Lambs blood was painted on the doorposts and lintels then the firstborn died. That story is way back in Exodus.

Lambs were used in the sacrificial system to be an offering for sin.

John the Baptist points to his cousin Jesus walking nearby and says behold, the Lamb of God.

There's a communion song I would love us to learn in time and the opening line says. "Behold the Lamb who bears our sins away, slain for us, and we remember." It is deliberately very churchy language borrowed right out of scripture.

(Oh and by the way – those of you patiently re-reading C.S. Lewis's Narnia books will find a Lamb turns up at the end of the Voyage of the Dawn Treader)

The metaphor I'm stretching to grapple with is the marriage of the Lamb to His bride the church, it seems to clash two metaphors together. It is, to be fair, a wild vision of St. John, so who am I to complain?

And the Lamb's bride is the church dressed in fine linen, bright and pure – this fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. Again that's quite something to stretch the imagination around.

What are we to make of it?

You will all have been to a fair few weddings in your time. I tend to see them from in front of the couple whereas guests you will see the couple from behind.

At my last church the chap who regularly played for weddings reached an age where it was becoming too stressful, so for some years Katherine and I took the weddings. The church organ there had fallen into complete disrepair, so Katherine played the keyboard which was to one side of the platform and I was front and centre with the couple – actually I really enjoyed sharing that part of ministry. Most people there had no idea we were a couple so I would sometimes talk about wedding rings and then let slip we were married.

I do try and say something about marriage being a metaphor for Christ and his church and the mystery of His love for us. A perfect marriage will have four things perfectly and this is what the relationship between us and Christ will be.

1. Love. There will be a perfect love. It will have the attributes and characteristics of love we have studied, pure and perfect and complete. We shall no longer need hope and no longer need faith, our faith and hope will be made complete in the fulfilment of love.
2. Intimacy. In marriage we speak of husband and wife becoming one flesh, and a day is promised when Christ the King shall be one with his church. We shall know him as he knows us – completely.
3. Joy. Loving and being loved brings joy...of course our experience is that it can also bring heart ache but in the future promised, there will be no more heartache, crying or pain – only joy.
4. Fidelity. The brokenness of the past will no longer be repeated, our own experiences of relationship failure will not be repeated, there will be an enduring perfect relationship.

Love, Christ and the Church

Love, intimacy, joy and fidelity – the marriage of Jesus Christ and the Church.

But although there will be a day of fulfilment, Jesus wants us to experience these attributes in our relationship with him now.

So – how joyful is your Christian faith?

How close do you experience God, whether Father, Son or Holy Spirit?

If you were explaining your experience, would you say you feel loved by God?

And I think all of us would have to admit to not maintaining our faith completely, we tend to get easily distracted.

God longs for us to experience His love completely so that we might love as completely. Patiently, kindly, enduring all things baring all things. Not boasting or remembering wrongs, but steadfastly and always appropriately acting out and living in the love of God.

Best done I find – in a church community, we are after all, Christ's bride.