

## **Sermon for Sunday 5 May 2024 (Evensong)**

**Revd Graham Naylor, Curate**

***Psalm 45; Song of Solomon 4.16–5.2; 8.6,7; Revelation 3.14-22***

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

Sometimes, readings that are chosen are a little bit strange, I think in some ways; tonight we have a couple of readings that work well together and one that maybe doesn't. Revelation. The reading from Revelation is a warning and an invitation. And both are born out of the love of our Lord Jesus Christ for his bride, the Church. We've got a Church that's in a bit of a mess, but there is this invitation to turn around and then a promise that to the one who conquers, I will give you a place with me on my throne, or beside me on my throne, is a better translation of the original language, just as I myself, conquered and sat down with my father on his throne. But our Old Testament reading was from the Song of Solomon, a love story. If you want to know what romantic love looks like, forget Mills and Boon, read the Song of Solomon.

But tonight, I want to do something slightly different. I want to move on from a love story between a lover and a beloved that we heard a little bit of in the Song of Solomon. And I want to look at the psalm that we sang, or the choir sang, many of you maybe just stood and listened as we chanted our way through it. But you should have in your Pewsheets, or in the order of service the modern translation of Psalm 45, and it would be helpful if you had that in front of you. I'm going to take a slightly different way through this, we're going to do something a little bit more than preaching a sermon, what's sometimes known as *lectio divina*, which is just a going through scripture slowly and thinking about each section.

But as we come to Psalm 45, I wonder who here has ever been to a wedding, either their own or somebody else's? Simon and I have been to a few, haven't we? Who hasn't been to a wedding? Good. You all know that at the wedding reception, there is always the tradition of speeches. One of the speeches comes from the best man. They usually start something like this. 'Good afternoon, everybody. I'm supposed to talk about the groom's excellent qualities today. And sing his praises. Sadly, I refuse to lie, and I'm terrible at singing. Thank you.' You'll get it later. Or, 'I don't believe in humiliating the groom. Therefore, this speech won't contain anything embarrassing or controversial about him. Instead, I'll only talk about his positive characteristics. Thank you and good night.'

Psalm 45 is like a best man's speech. In some of the Bible translations, it's entitled 'An Ode to the King' or 'Ode to the Royal Wedding', the King on his Wedding Day or the Royal Wedding. It's broken up into a structure which, if you look at the sheet that I've given you, there are some gaps between sections, and they're the sections. It starts with the poet's enthusiasm for the king, moves on to the king's beauty, and then the king's glory. Then it's the bride's beauty, the bridal procession, and then the poet's final wish for the king. We're just going to look through this. 'My heart overflows with a goodly theme'; 'I dress my verses to the king'; 'my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe', or a ready writer. Not, as a friend of mine

said, a paperback writer. The poet here, expresses his enthusiasm for the king. Now, that It may have been genuine or it may have been forced, more likely, genuine.

His enthusiasm for the king, the royal king, in his splendour - he says, 'You are the most handsome of men'. This tells me that this poet was Cornish. I lived in Cornwall for five years, and every time I saw some of the old boys, 'Hello there, 'ansome'; 'oh, it's right 'ansome'. You may laugh. But when Jesus talked about taking the gospel to Jerusalem, to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the Earth, it is likely that he was talking about Cornwall; because the Fénitian sailors used to go to Cornwall and get the tin and the copper. I've lived in Cornwall for five years; it is the end of the Earth, I can assure you. For those who go on holiday and think you want to retire there, talk to me afterwards. So this Cornish poet, we'll call him the Cornish poet, is saying, 'King is 'ansome'. Grace is poured upon his lips because his gracious speech.

Now we start to get into this territory of this psalm not just being about a real king, although he's not named, in the Old Testament, but it's starting to turn into being messianic and speaking of Jesus. Because what was said of Jesus, Luke 4.22; this is when he'd spoken the sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth. 'All spoke well of him and were amazed at his gracious words that came from his mouth.' There's graciousness on the lips of the king that the poet is extolling, and Jesus speaks with gracious words.

Moving on to the next section, which is verse 3 to verse 5; it speaks of a king who conquers. In the Psalm, it's speaking of military might, riding on victoriously. But he's riding on victoriously for the cause of truth. What was said of Jesus? Or what did Jesus even say of himself? When he was before Pilate, you can read this in John 18, Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I'm a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world to testify to the truth.' So we have a king who is known for campaigning in a military way for the cause of truth and right and justice. Jesus says, 'I have come to testify to the truth.'

The next section, verses 6-9, speaks of the King's glory, and here it gets really interesting. Because where you see, 'Oh God', in verse 6, and in verse 7, 'God, your God', it's using the Hebrew word 'Elohim'. Now, that can mean a king, but more often we translate it God. In some translations, it actually does say, your throne, O king, endures forever and ever. But a human king's throne wouldn't endure forever and ever. Here we start to see this psalm speaking of Jesus who will come, who will come to reign as king, and who will reign for ever and ever upon the throne that his Father has given him. It speaks of his wealth; 'Therefore, God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness. Your robes are all fragrant with myrrh, and aloes encase you from ivory palaces. It speaks of wealth and abundance.' It speaks of the divine anointing of a royal king and priest. But you notice at the end of verse 9, we start to introduce the queen who is going to be the bride. She's the daughter of the king, but she is now going to move from being a princess, and in marrying the king, she is going to be, as his bride, the queen.

Then we move on to the next section, verses 10 through to 15. 'Here, O daughter, consider and incline your ear, forget your people in your father's house.' Genesis 2, the story of creation; it speaks of the son leaving home, leaving his father and his mother, taking to him a wife. He changes from being a son to

being a husband, as a daughter changes to being a wife when there is a wedding. In the Psalm, her devotion is now towards the king, to her husband, but responding to his love, acknowledging his dignity and honour as king, accepting his status, if you like, as Lord.

People will bow down to this king. Verse 12 says, 'The people of Tyre will seek your favour with gifts'. Tyre is symbolic in the Old Testament of the world that is alien to God. Those people who are self-sufficient, who are independently proud of themselves. And yet it says, 'One day, they will come and favour the King with their gifts.' A helpful thing is to read Revelation 21. You will know that maybe from funeral services; New Heaven, New Earth. To read Revelation 21 alongside Psalm 45 is really interesting, because Revelation 21.24 says, 'The nations [and read that 'Tyre'], will walk by its light. The kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. It speaks of those who were opposed to God, coming and recognising that God is King. The bride is prepared and presented to her groom, the King.

With that in mind, I'm just going to read from Ephesians. Now, with the caveat that some of you may have heard bad teaching on this passage that has been abused, has been misogyny as a result. That is a wrong reading of this scripture, but let me just read it. 'Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, to present the church to himself in splendour without a spot or wrinkle or anything of any kind. Yes, so she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife, loves himself. For no-one ever hates his body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. 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. I am applying it to the Christ and the Church. Revelation speaks of the Church being the bride of Christ.

I wonder when you think of us here in Lavenham, Prestom St Mary, or when we meet with our brothers and as from other local churches, whether you think of yourselves collectively as the bride of Christ, being prepared, being adorned, as the Psalm 45 says, with golden woven robes, coloured robes, ready to be led to King Jesus for that marriage of Jesus and his Church.

I'm going to take a risk here because we've got a debate going on at the moment in the wider church, but particularly in the Church of England, about human sexuality and marriage. It's an important debate because it's not just about people's understanding of the right place for intimacy and human sexuality, but God has provided marriage as a way, a symbol of Jesus and his Church. We've got to be very careful about how we treat that. Because the human institution of marriage is a visible demonstration of the eventual marriage of Jesus and his Church, of a royal marriage to a bride who is splendid without spot, without blemish, much as Psalm 45 talks about.

Then we come to the concluding words of the poet, his desire, his blessing for the king. He looks to the past, says, well, okay, you've had people go before you; but more important, we're going to look to the future, to the generations ahead who will praise this wonderful king. I'll leave us with two thoughts tonight; one, as we conduct ourselves as Church, as the people of God, that we remember we are being prepared

as a bride for our Lord Jesus Christ; and that, yes, the saints that have gone before us have gone before us. But we, of this generation, have a responsibility to the future generations to bring them to a place where they can offer praise to our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.