

Today we are participating in a remarkable event. It is not just that Ian and Leanne would want to get married (that is remarkable enough...especially that Leanne would want to marry Ian who only got one mark on her score sheet!), but that they should desire to be married in this way. Ian and Leanne have very deliberately chosen to be married in a Christian ceremony, as an expression of the fact that they both belong to the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

As they have gone through the wedding vows you will have noticed that they have used very traditional wording. They have not chosen that wording because it is 'traditional' but because it is true! Today some weddings change the vow considerably (e.g. I, Leanne take you Ian to be my husband, as long as our love shall last!...In my experience this would not be for very long...what happens when you have your first argument!). But Ian and Leanne have not chosen to do this. The wording of the vows—and the fact that they are placed in the context of a Christian service of worship—indicate that the power for their marriage does not lie within themselves.

Ian and Leanne have come to see some wonderful things about marriage...not just wonderful things about one another. As a Christian pastor I have been delighted to see that they have come to understand that their marriage is not just about themselves or their own happiness. They have come to see that marriage is not just about human actions, or about human feelings. Marriage is about heavenly things. It is about God and his relationship to us.

The Bible teaches us that marriage is not of human origin. The fact that all cultures practice marriage in one form or another indicates that it is universal. But the universal nature of marriage is not because of human inventiveness. Marriage is not really a social contract, or an agreement that gives certain advantages to those being married or certain social status to their families. Ian and Leanne have come to see that marriage is *given* from above, not created from below. God has given the human race the gift of marriage. In it, he reveals something of who he is, and through it he teaches us about his love for us.

One of the words you will have noticed in the vows is the word 'covenant'....as in 'this ring is a token of the covenant' made between us this day. Covenant is a profoundly biblical concept. Covenant expresses the way in which God relates to us. He does not relate to us in terms of a business deal or proposition. He does not come to us with a contract form to be signed, as though if we only keep our end of the bargain, he will keep his end of the deal.

The best way to understand the meaning of covenant is to look at the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. He came into this world to save us, not because we had kept our end of the bargain, but because God has kept faith with his own word. In fact, the Bible teaches us that no human being since the sin of our first parents has ever kept God's word. There is none who has ever obeyed his laws; or kept his commandments; or truly loved him with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. Certainly there is no one who has truly loved his neighbour as himself. Jesus said that these two things: the love for his Father, and true love for one's neighbour, were the two most important things in the world. The history of human society, filled as it is with unfaithfulness, wars, violence, greed and broken promises, teaches us that we do not have a heart to love. We certainly do not have a heart to love God. And our love for our neighbours is often deeply influenced by self seeking motives.

But God's love is not like this at all. "Here is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us...and gave his son as the propitiation for our sins." This love of God is not according to a business arrangement. He does not love us if we would only do the right thing, or keep his law. No, he loves us while we were yet his enemies, and while we were filled with hatred towards him.

When Jesus came to live among us, we saw how deep that hatred was. When he came with arms outstretched in love, and words and actions full of love, we created an excuse to kill him, by nailing him to a cross. Jesus was killed because we hate God. But this does not mean that God hates us. The death of Jesus was the very means that God

had used to bring judgment to our sins. He met our hatred with love, and when we were crucifying him Jesus prayed “Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing”. Here is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and gave his Son for us, that our sins might be exposed on the Cross and there carried away Jesus.

This is where we understand covenant most clearly. In the action of Jesus’ death on the Cross, we see that God has not treated us according to what we have deserved. If he had given us what we had deserved, we would have to live under his judgment forever. But his covenant love is so enduring, that he has fulfilled his covenant promise. He promised to remove our iniquities and to remember our sins no more. This is not because we deserve it, but only because he has promised it. He keeps his promises, and so he loves us by meeting our hatred with his love.

What does all of this have to do with Ian and Leanne?

Firstly, what they have come to experience is this very fact, that God has loved them and he has forgiven all their sin through the death of his Son on the Cross. Ian and Leanne are Christian people because they have come to know the forgiveness of their sins through Jesus Christ.

Secondly, it means that they know the power for their marriage does not lie within their own hearts. They do not have the power within them, by themselves, to love God or to love one another. But love does not come from ourselves, it comes from God. Ian and Leanne recognize that their vows are only possible because God has loved them, and continues to love them. In this love they have the power to continue in love. Today they are radiant with joy, and glowing with good health. It will not always be this way. They need to be filled with the love of God so that they might love one another in years to come, when they are not so young and beautiful as they are this afternoon. (Leanne, Ian will not always be as handsome as he is today. Eventually, for example, he might lose his hair and go bald! Ian, Leanne will not always be a trim and wrinkle free as she is today. Eventually she may have grey hair, too...but, at least she will still have hair!)

Thirdly, it means that they can live in the power of God's covenant. They can be assured of God's settled affection towards them. No matter what sufferings come or what deep waters they will have to travel through, they never need to doubt that God's love is with them and for them. Their knowledge of the love of God is not tied to their outward circumstances (i.e. whether they are rich or poor, enjoy good health or illness) but by the fact that God's love has come to them in Cross of Jesus Christ, where their sins were taken away.

Fourthly, it means that what we are seeing today is a sort of picture of the way God will be faithful to his people. The Bible speaks about Christ being our Bridegroom, and his people being the Bride. In their vows, Ian and Leanne have given themselves to one another. All that was Ian's is now Leanne's. And all that was Leanne's is now Ian's. So we see a picture of the love of God for us. When Christ comes to us, all that is ours (our sin, guilt, shame and wickedness) he takes as his own. And all that he has (his righteousness, love and relationship with the Father) he gives us as our own. This marriage, then, is a picture of the Great Marriage between Christ and his people. So through this service today, Ian and Leanne have led us to the very heart of God's nature. It is this which will be their security and strength for the many years of life that stretch out before them. Amen.