

Get Me To The Church On Time (October 2020)

October 2, 2020

by Rev Paul Graham

"I'm getting married in the morning..." The song comes lilting down the stairs as the bride's family mill around the house, beavering away at the final few tasks that need to be completed before the big day. The bouquet has been delivered early, due to an innocent mix-up with dates, the wedding car hire chap is on the other end of the phone confirming that he has got not just got the right date but also the right address, there's a smell of cooking emanating from the kitchen that is causing blood pressure to rise at the thought of the carefully ordered clothes giving off a stale imitation as the party process down the aisle tomorrow and grandad is sleeping in the chair, his snores adding to the general hubbub and mayhem.

The bride's family are full of joy that one of them will be finally off their hands; the responsibility for her wellbeing, welfare and eye-watering shopping bill will be somebody else's by the end of tomorrow. Though, to be fair, his own needs aren't to be sniffed at; his demand for devotion, the times that he loves to be alone, contrasted with the vast number of friends he surrounds himself with will be no easy task for their daughter. But at least, as her parents fleetingly lock eyes as they pass under piles of flowers (her) and bacon sandwiches (him), it's not going to be their problem.

He's a nice lad, they remind themselves. True, he can be a bit strange at times, what with the long hair and straggly beard, but at least he's honest. Sometimes they wish he wasn't quite so brutal in his honesty, but at least his heart's in the right place. And as to his face; there's an openness that leads to easy smiles and an engaging laugh. But there's also a sadness; a deeply lying shadow that occasionally catches the unsuspecting watcher, leaving them with an unbidden tear in the eye. For one so full of life and joy, there's so much more besides in the depths. But it's hardly surprising, when you take a moment to understand what led up to this day and the forthcoming nuptials...

It's such a shame that his first wife died so suddenly. All seemed to be going well with the pair of them. Of course, no marriage is perfect and there had been suspicions that his wife had been tempted to stray. Rumours of affairs had been rife, but nothing was ever proved and the marriage, on its many good days, could inspire others that all would be well. No marriage will survive without hard work and commitment, which certainly was there, at least most of the time. Sometimes more in the background, like an engine ticking over gently; at other times roaring mightily with the exhilaration of the open road and the wind whipping through their hair as married life took them to new and exciting places.

But then it all came to a horrible, depressing stop. One day, out of the blue, with little warning and certainly little time to prepare. From a living, breathing human being, to a cold lifeless corpse in a matter of hours. Such suddenness took everyone by surprise, but then they all had their own problems to tackle, so life quickly moved on.

It doesn't seem that much time has elapsed, and they all arrive at this day: a day of anticipation and excitement. Who knows what the future will hold for the pair of them as they start on this new life together? Who knows what's around the corner? But also, who knows what baggage will still be carried by the pair of them. His previous wife left a long legacy that their daughter will have to live with; what will be expected of her as she sets up home with her new husband?

And not just by him; his friends enjoyed their company, but she's got her own friends from work to be integrated into the group. Will they play nicely and get along, or will someone's nose be put out of joint because they no longer have the status they once enjoyed. Knowing their daughter, his golfing friends might quickly find out that there's less time for the hospitality of the 19th hole than there used to be...

Her parents know all about the compromises that they've had to make during the course of their long marriage; their new son-in-law had many years of negotiating priorities in his first marriage. They hope that their daughter is going to learn quickly...

All of the above is a parable for our time as church, both locally and nationally; we went from being a church with a long history of active worship and many opportunities to publicly declare faith in Jesus, or at least have a jolly good time together, usually with cake close at hand.

And then, in March, it stopped. Like the first wife in the parable, for many it has felt like the church died as lockdown kicked in. For others, those who have continued an active faith through private prayer, acts of loving service and caring for others, the church may have just gone into a “public coma” while moving underground.

But, to use the extended metaphor above, we are now starting to emerge to face a new future. To me, it feels as if we have the opportunity to be “remarried” as the Bride of Christ as we have the chance to re-evaluate who we are, what we do, and probably most importantly, why. This can be an exciting time, just as the unseen bride in the story sounds carefree in her singing. But this can also be scary, as we might fear leaving behind the legacy of the old life (wife) and some of the securities of yesteryear. We want to avoid the risk of, to misuse a different metaphor, throwing out not just baby and bathwater, but also bath and bathroom.

We also have a chance to live beyond some of the sins of our predecessor. In the past (and some would argue currently), the wider church has struggled with its commitment to Christ; the rumoured affairs of the metaphor stand for the times that the church has tried to hide its prioritising of money and power over love and grace (and sometimes hasn't hidden it very well). Now we have the chance to be the church that Christ calls us to with the commitment that he longs for.

So, here are some questions to ponder as we head towards our “wedding day” (as government guidance allows):

- What excites you about the future as part of the “Bride of Christ”?
- What scares you?
- As we move into our marital home (church building), what of the old married life (church activities) do we want to keep and what are we willing to let go?
- What are we wanting to introduce?
- What will we do with our old friends, those we used to meet up with?
- What new friends are we wanting to make?
- What costs are we willing to count to commit to our Bridegroom?