

THE BRIDEGROOM AND HIS FRIENDS

John 3:22-36

In our reading today Jesus is engaged in ministry in the Judean countryside and the disciples of John the Baptist apparently become jealous at the success of Jesus's ministry. But John moves to defuse the situation and embraces Jesus's ministry enthusiastically and expresses his supernatural understanding of Jesus's ministry and mission. So as we look at the passage together, you can find the main text on page [***] of the church Bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be displayed on the screen. We're looking at text from John the Gospel writer involving a different John, John the Baptist – which is confusing – so for clarity I'll simply refer to John the Baptist as John and to John's Gospel as the Gospel.

Let's begin by looking at verses 22-26:

“After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptised. Now John also was baptising at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptised. (This was before John was put in prison.) An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—well, he is baptising, and everyone is going to him.””
(verses 22-26)

After Jesus's meeting with Nicodemus recorded at the beginning of chapter 3, Jesus and his disciples moved out into the countryside of Judea, probably in the Jordan plain near Jericho, although the text doesn't give us the exact location. We're told that John was baptising at Aenon which was probably some distance away. We don't know exactly where Aenon was although the name means many springs, which fits well with there being plenty of water. The text also doesn't tell us exactly how long Jesus and his followers spent there, but we get the impression of an unhurried period in which Jesus and his

followers got to know each other better. The reading speaks of Jesus baptising, although we know from John 4:2 that the baptising was carried out by Jesus's disciples and not be Jesus in person. I don't believe we should see this baptism as anything like Christian baptism, and certainly not the baptism with the Holy Spirit which John had foretold that Jesus would administer. It was more probably a continuation of John's baptism of repentance, after all many of Jesus's disciples had originally been disciples of John, with some implications of adherence to Jesus. Indeed Jesus's early preaching contained specific calls to repentance (Matthew 4:17).

This Gospel doesn't tell us about the imprisonment and beheading of John, apart from the simple statement here in verse 24. Probably it was so well known that John the Gospel writer felt he didn't need to do more than simply mention it. He's also making it clear that he's talking about a time of very early ministry by Jesus before the Galilean ministry with which the synoptic gospels begin. The Gospel does tell us that John's disciples became involved in a dispute with a Jew over ceremonial washing. The Jew may well have been an Essene from the Qumran community, which engaged in ceremonial washing and he could have felt that John's baptism was a corruption of their ritual. John himself may well have been a member of the Qumran community in his early years, but we can't be sure. In any event, in some unexplained way, this dispute apparently led John's disciples to complain to John about the success of Jesus's ministry. Jesus isn't actually mentioned by name here, but the use of the words "the one you testified about" make it clear that the reference is to Jesus.

John's reply is an immediate justification of Jesus's success – look at verses 27-30:

"To this John replied, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That

joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.” (verses 27-30)

John’s first words apply to him, he cannot be more than the role God has given him as the forerunner who make the way for Jesus. These words also to Jesus himself who’s success has been given to him by God. From our viewpoint we can also see them as expressing the great truth that our salvation is purely through God’s grace, it’s a free gift from God – although I think it’s unlikely that this is what John had in mind when he uttered these words.

John isn’t downcast at what’s happening; he’s overjoyed. He uses the beautiful illustration of a wedding to bring this out. In John’s illustration he is the friend of the bridegroom and Jesus is the bridegroom. At a wedding the bridegroom is the important man. His friend may stand by him and rejoice with him. Indeed, in the Jewish scene he could do more. “The friend who attends the bridegroom” was an important person. He was responsible for many of the details of the wedding, and in particular it was he who brought the bride to the bridegroom. But when he had done this, his task was over. He did not expect to take the centre of the stage. “The bride belongs to the bridegroom.” But a wedding is a happy occasion for others than the bridegroom. The bridegroom’s friend “is full of joy.” The joy of his friend brings joy to him, too. In the same way, says John, his own joy, not simply that of Jesus, fills him completely. The news his disciples brought him was what he had been longing to hear. It filled his cup of joy to the full. The true measure of John’s magnanimity and greatness are found in verse 30 – “He [Jesus] must become greater; I [John] must become less.” D L Moody once said: “be humble or stumble.” John’s followers may have had hearts and minds full of jealousy, but John didn’t, his heart and mind were full of joy. John shows his true humility by having real joy in the success of another. John ended his ministry well.

It’s not quite clear whether the words of verses 31-36 are those of John or are a reflection by the Gospel writer. I personally believe that

they are a reflection of the Gospel writer, but in any event they are of great significance. Let's start by looking at verses 31-34:

“The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no-one accepts his testimony. The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit.” (verses 31-34)

The reference in verse 31 to the heavenly origin of Jesus – “the one who comes from above” – is something that the writer of this Gospel delights in. His object in writing the Gospel is to show that Jesus is the Christ, and one way he does that is by demonstrating his heavenly origins. Being from above, Jesus is superior to all on earth. He's superior to the whole human race. There's a particular reference to John here. His followers may think of him and seek to represent him as the Messiah, but this verse contrasts John with Jesus the – true Messiah – the one who is from above and is superior to all others.

The text goes on to say that no-one accepts Jesus's testimony. We're not meant to take that completely literally, but the Gospel writer has made it clear earlier in this chapter 3 that we must be reborn of the Holy Spirit in order to accept Jesus's witness. In our natural condition we won't accept Christ's witness. In verse 33 we see that those who accept Christ are not merely entering into a relationship with a fellow human being (as they would be doing, for example, if they attached themselves to John). They are accepting what God has said. They are recognizing the heavenly origin of Jesus. They are acknowledging the truth of God's revelation in Christ. They are proclaiming to all their deep conviction that God is true and will not mislead them in the witness that Jesus bears.

Verse 34 tells us that Jesus has been sent by God. His words are not merely human but divine and to receive his witness is to receive God's word. Here I think the Gospel writer is saying that God the Father gives his Holy Spirit to Jesus without limit and this perfect

endowment with the Spirit guarantees the truth of Jesus's words, rather than saying that God gives the spirit to believers without limit. Although, of course, God and Jesus do give the Spirit to all believers at the moment they turn to Christ in true faith.

Let's now look at the last two verses of our text, verses 35 and 36: "The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." (verses 35-36)

The mutual love of the Father and the Son means much in this Gospel. We have the picture of a perfect unity in love. And that love of the Father for the Son guarantees the Son's sovereign powers. We can trust Jesus in and for all things, for the Father "has placed everything in his hands." Here this refers especially to the gift of life in the Spirit. People may come to Christ as they would come to God. Christ, with the full authority of the Father, gives the Spirit bountifully, as the previous verse hints, and gives life eternal, as verse 36 makes clear. The words also indicate the dependence of the human Jesus on the Father, which is one of the great themes of this Gospel. We are assured of Jesus's pre-eminent place (he is the *Logos*, the Son, etc.), but we are also assured of his real humanity. In his human nature, Jesus depended on the Father as other men do. In this we see his humility and lowliness, and his perfect example to us.

Verse 36 is one of the great verses of the Bible, it really sums up the whole of the New Testament gospel message: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." (verse 36)

If we have true faith that Christ is Lord, the Son of God and believe that he died on the cross for our sins then we have eternal life, an eternity in heaven, in a new perfect resurrection body. Here, we're not being given some vague promise that we will be given eternal life one day some time in the future. No, we're being told that we have eternal life now, "Whoever believes in the Son *has* eternal life". Yes,

we will one day pass through the portal of death, but the gift of eternal life is ours right now when we truly believe. Here we need to remember that we're speaking of 'true' faith, a faith which enters into our life and transforms it; issuing forth in obedience and good works as James tells us (James 2:17; 2:26).

However, if we don't have that faith, then our sins are not forgiven – and here we need to remember that we're all sinners (Romans 3:23) – and God's wrath at our sin remains with us and we shall fall under God's judgement on the last day when Christ returns to judge the whole world. The idea of the wrath of God is not a very palatable or popular idea today – but as we've seen this morning it is completely scriptural, not just in the Old Testament but in the New Testament also. What the result of judgement under God's wrath will be is not for me to say, but I'm sure it won't be good or pleasant. Indeed unless we're being saved from real peril when we turn to Christ there isn't much meaning in our salvation. It really does make a difference what we believe; your eternal destiny hangs in the balance. Jesus himself reiterated this truth as is recorded in chapter 14 of the Gospel: “Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6 NIV)

So, let's repent of our sins – which I hope we've already done in our time of confession this morning – and turn to Christ in faith, in true faith, right here right now this morning, acknowledging and believing that Jesus is our Lord, the Son of God, our saviour who died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. In so doing we are assured by God's word that we have – not that we will have, but that we already have – eternal life with the Father and the Son.