

Trinity 20 Pusey House, GDW  
The Divine-Human Marriage: Incarnation and the Mystical Nativity  
Proverbs 9.1-6, Psalm 145.15-end, Ephesians 5.15-21, Matthew 22.1-14



'Mystic Nativity', 1500, Sandro Botticelli, © The National Gallery, London

***The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son; and sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding;***

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who makes a marriage for his son. What does this marriage look like, and why is it the focus of the Gospel for today?

This marriage is the subject of the front of the bulletin, in the painting of the Mystic Nativity by Sandro Botticelli (1500), a painting which hangs in the National Gallery in London. It is the marriage of heaven and earth, of the divine and human.

We began worship with the words of the Angels who spoke to the shepherds, Glory be to God on high: Every mass unfolds within the universe proclaimed by the Angels. In Botticelli's painting, peace is pictured by the embrace of angels and men and women along the bottom of the painting.

The colours in the painting are not just by accident – the Angels are wearing the white of a pure faith, the green of a hope which is the soil or growth and fruitfulness, and the red of a burning charity toward God and humanity. The embrace in an embrace of faith, hope and love uniting heaven and earth. In Christ, in the words of Psalm 85, mercy and truth have met together, they have embraced, righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

The golden dome of the eternal heavens has opened, and angels come down to dance in joy and to invite us into the same circle.

The centre of the painting is the infant Christ, the baby in whom God rends the heavens and comes down, and His Mother, her Maker's maker. The marriage to which the King invites the wedding guests is nothing less than the marriage of the divine and human in Christ: 'truly God and truly man [...] recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation' (Chalcedon, 451).

Now some of you veterans of many a Pusey House sermon may be inclined to wonder why you are hearing about this divine-human marriage yet again. Hasn't that been the subject of more than one Epiphany sermon, more than one sermon on the feasts of the Gospel parables? And here, I would like to turn to Dr Pusey. (It is in principle a good thing to give Dr Pusey a look-in on First Week.)

Pusey introduces first volume of parochial sermons, published in 1848, with the following words:

The writer [...] wishes to remark what sort of repetition he did not wish to avoid, the inculcation of the Great Mystery, expressed in the words to be '*in Christ*,' to be 'Members of Christ,' 'Temples of the Holy Ghost;' that Christ doth, through the Holy Ghost Whom He hath given to us, dwell really and truly in the hearts of the faithful. This doctrine he has the more insisted upon, as it is to be feared that it is habitually neglected, even by many who do not in words deny it. (Preface, v).

Pusey's insistence on this Great Mystery, this great Sacrament pictured in Botticelli, enacted at the altar, and lived in the body of Christ, is commemorated every day here in a prayer at Evensong. We remember Pusey in prayer to the Father as one who 'contended by his life and learning earnestly for the truth of the Incarnation of thy Son'. Why? Why did he contend for this doctrine? The marriage of human divine, heaven and earth is as much as it is insisted on, says Pusey, as it is habitually neglected, even by many who do not in words deny it. The idea, for example, that we are merely followers of a great teacher, is an example of this denial.

The Incarnation is, first of all, a doctrine about the union of the divine and human in Christ the Word made flesh. But it is more, it is also as the model for understanding

how divine truth is communicated in human words in the Bible, or how the mystical marriage is made real for us in signs and symbols which belong both to material and spiritual world: in water, bread, and wine. To say that God is manifest in the flesh is not only to say that the Ruler over all, perfect wisdom and mercy, is veiled and revealed in the weak baby at the centre of Botticelli's painting, but also to see 'earthly Sacraments, yet full of Heaven, earthly words, yet full of the Word' (Pusey). Newman, Keble, and Pusey are known for their emphasis on the Real Presence of Christ in the sacrament of Holy Communion, for teaching that 'there is a true, real, actual [...] Communication of the Body and Blood of Christ to the believer through the Holy Elements' a spiritual gift which is 'more real, because [it is] Spiritual'; 'more real than if we could, with Thomas, feel Him with our hands, or thrust our hands into His side' (Pusey). But leaders of Oxford Movement also taught that there is a 'real presence' of Christ in the lettered body of the Scriptures. Pusey describes the Bible as 'a living and true Body, which it hath pleased God to take, in order to be accessible to us; and wherein alone we can see Him "Full of grace and truth"'. For him, Botticelli's painting is not a creative work of fancy, but a picture of what is really there when we pull back the veil.

Pusey described both creation and Scripture as 'emanations of the Word', of the Son and Creator: 'All things then are His word, for His word was their being'. In other words, God takes on flesh not only in the Incarnation, but in analogous and different ways in all created things, all created things are "spoken by God, speak of Him Who spoke them; they are syllables of that Eternal Voice [...] each work a word, as [...] when the Word was made flesh – words and works – with Him were one". In Botticelli's painting, creation also rejoices in the wedding, is caught up in and transformed by the wedding. The mystical marriage is the most secure foundation of a concern for the environment. This is why the way that the leaders of the Oxford movement insisted on the Incarnation was so radical; in this doctrine, the whole of creation is gathered up, healed, redeemed.

Well, why does this history lesson matter, why does what the leaders of the Oxford Movement struggled with over 150 years ago still matter now? Our worship today unfolds within the Angels' proclamation of peace of earth, and yet isn't the marriage which Botticelli pictured also in different ways under attack? Before we even begin to think, it is hard to see how heaven and earth are brought together in Christ, how the picture is not an aspiration rather than the real thing. And if we live as if it is not the real thing, it has consequences. The French theologian Henri de Lubac argued that the modern world's attack on the mystical marriage, the way in which we live as if nature and super-nature are pushed apart, was directly connected to the way in which many in France in the second world war 'accommodated uncritically to the fascist neo-paganism of the Vichy regime'.<sup>1</sup> If nature and supernature, earth and heaven do not belong together, are not married, then it possible to imagine, to live, as if the political life could also be disconnected from the supernatural. In other words, without the marriage, it was possible to go to Mass on Sunday and say 'Heil Hitler!' the very next day. This is what we do whenever our lives deny the principles which we hold most dear. The doctrine of the Incarnation, and of the mystical marriage, is a practical doctrine, and all the more practical because it is spiritual.

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery*. Oxford: OUP, 2009, 89.

Let's return to the parable. It is haunting, a little disturbing, that those who do not come to the wedding, who reject the invitation, are getting on with normal, necessary things. One goes to his farm, another to his business. Perhaps the title of this sermon, 'Bored by Glory', is a bit unfair. Are those who reject the invitation not attracted by the marriage painted so beautifully and evocatively by Botticelli? Are they bored? More likely, they just fail to see. Here Joseph in the painting is instructive (to the left of the Christ Child). Why is he sleeping? This is a traditional way of picturing Joseph in icons and paintings. He's not just tired, the man who does nothing but sleeps anyway. He is a kind of picture of human nature not able to grasp what is unfolding before him, one who has not yet heeded the call to wake out of sleep, who has not yet had his eyes strengthened to see what his wife and even the ox and the ass can see.

Then there are those who don't just decline the invitation to the marriage, but who take the servants who come with the invitation, but they seize them, beat them, and kill them. They correspond to the figure of King Herod who lurks behind the mystical nativity, who challenges all invitations to the wedding. There is something of Herod, the king who does not wish to acknowledge another king, another authority, in each of us. The struggle we have in seeing the beauty which Botticelli paints, the struggle which often masks itself behind a supposed conflict between faith and reason, may in fact be that struggle with King Herod in ourselves – do we really want another king, or do we want to be our own rulers?

The text at the top of the painting brings this home: The Greek inscription translates as: 'This picture, at the end of the year 1500, in the troubles of Italy, I Alessandro, in the half-time after the time, painted, according to the eleventh [chapter] of Saint John, in the second woe of the Apocalypse, during the release of the devil for three-and-a-half years; then he shall be bound in the twelfth [chapter] and we shall see [him buried] as in this picture'.

Botticelli lived at a time of great instability, when Florence was in danger of being destroyed by French armies, and when the preaching of the apocalyptic preacher Savonarola fed into those fears.

The picture is not just of something in the past: it is a picture which reveals the struggles which always surround the celebration of the marriage. In it, our past, present, and future are brought together, and the significance of living each moment in the light of eternity is brought to light and revealed for us. Behind and around the angels embracing the men and women, devils are fleeing back underground. The message of peace on earth is a promise because there is a struggle, a strife which takes place not just out in the world, far away in places like Aleppo, but also in our own hearts. The text from Revelation invites us to ask where we stand, how we hear the invitation to the wedding.

***And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding-garment: and he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding-garment?***

What is this wedding garment? In the Bible, acceptance at the last day is described in a variety of ways: having made the most of the talents entrusted to us, bearing seed, having our lamps burning, caring for the poor and afflicted, walking by the Spirit,

coming to the wedding with joy and thanksgiving. Or, to wear the wedding garment is to be clothed in the white, green, and red garments of the angels, with the faith, hope and charity which are the great gifts of the Spirit.

The most basic point to see is that the wedding garment then is not our own. This garment is given to us in Christ who does not only invite us to the wedding, but who marries Himself to us, to His Bride the Church, and to each of us individually. This wedding garment is the robe of Christ's righteousness and holiness, his virtues, his faithfulness, and his love.

Wearing the wedding garment means realizing that we don't have to make ourselves worthy or loveable or wise. This is what God does for us. In the parable, it is the bad and the good who are invited. If Botticelli's picture were bigger, you could see that the people being hugged by the angels are not only being embraced, they are being lifted up, strengthened. They are weary, hungry, and seeking the peace and joy which is the gift of the wedding. They are each one of us. Putting on the wedding garment also means accepting that we desperately need what God has to give, that we need to be transformed and changed. That is a promise, but one which comes at a cost also.

The invitation is not just made in a parable, it is given again to us today. ***Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars: She hath killed her beasts; she hath mingled her wine; she hath also furnished her table.*** Here the veil is pulled back, and we are invited to a Holy Communion, not just invited to the marriage, but invited to participate.

We are invited to the wedding feast, to the marriage supper of the lamb, to the joy of the kingdom, and to the embrace of the angels.