Athirst for God: the wine of the kingdom

Exodus 24.1-11

A sermon preached by Nick Moir

They had met many years ago; they had been walking out together for several years; they could look back on key moments they had shared; he had rescued her from a life of drudgery and misery and had led her into a brighter future. But that still seemed a distance away. In the meantime there had been hard, difficult times: she had not always known where the next meal was coming from; she had even wished to be back in her former life- hard and degrading, yes, but at least she knew she would be fed and clothed and housed. And he, well he kept moving on, day by day and even in the night, leading her onwards. They travelled further away from her old securities, deeper into the desert and seemingly heading nowhere, until after many years and many travails they arrived at the foot of a mountain, where he declared his intentions, had an altar built, and they exchanged solemn vows, sealed in blood, and then went up the mountain to consummate their marriage and to share in the wedding feast.

And that is basically what happens in our Old Testamament reading, for this is the making of a covenant, a solemn agreement made before witnesses. But this covenant, like the marriage covenant, is not just about legal obligations; it is primarily a declaration of love and faithfulness. God gives himself utterly to his people and they offer solemn words of faithfulness to him; even including 'we will'. This

relationship is different from that of other gods with other tribes. You may remember the Egyptian goddess of love, Hathor, whose shrine was a little further north in Sinai on Mount Serabit. Unlike the God of Israel you could and still can see her face – it's rather beautiful. Yahweh, Israel's God could not be seen and in that he was unique. But there was something else unique about Yahweh, which struck me when I looked into Hathor's most holy place, because next to it was another chamber at the end of the temple, like two bedchambers side by side. This belonged to Thoth, otherwise known as Mr Hathor. All the gods of the Ancient Near East had consorts- all, that is, except Israel's God , though there were attempts to marry him off so that Israel's religion could be like that of the surrounding nations. But there was no second chamber beside the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple; there was no Mrs Yahweh – at least, there was no divine Mrs Yahweh and there couldn't be because Yahweh was already spoken for, married in a ceremony on Mount Sinai to his people. And that is the second unique feature of Israel's God – that he is uniquely bound in love and faithfulness to his people.

On behalf of the people Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and seventy of the elders of Israel go up the mountain and, it says, 'they saw the God of Israel' in one of the very rare occasions in the Old Testament when it says that God is seen. We are not told what they saw – perhaps what they saw was indescribable or perhaps there was nothing there to see except what surrounded what they could not see. It's interesting that just as the Old Testament describes what was in the Holy of Holies

in the Temple- the golden cherubim at the sides and the ark and its cover below, which the psalmist speaks of as Yahweh's footstool - so all that is described here is what lies beneath his feet, 'a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness'(v10). This is a heavenly vision, what later Christian writers would call the beatific vision - that is, what awaits us in glory. So perhaps we can think of this as a vision of what is to be – or, in the words of Jesus, the kingdom of God.

In our gospel reading Jesus looks forward to being able to drink wine again, anew, in the kingdom of God, and the meal he has just inaugurated is like an anticipation of that kingdom, literally a foretaste of it. As Moses and the elders of Israel beheld God and ate and drank, so do we in this foretaste of the kingdom. And every time we do this in remembrance of him it's as though the floor turns into a pavement of sapphire and we are caught up into heaven. To my shame I have to say that I have attended many Communion services, indeed presided at many Communion services, that have to me had more of the feel, dignity, ambience and transience of a drive-in Macdonalds than of the Ritz, but I find now that more often my usually earthbound vision is lifted as though an angel gently lifts my chin and points upwards to the heavenly sapphire-paved courts where God, if not seen, is at least felt. We behold God and eat and drink and have a little taste of the glory that awaits us in the coming kingdom.

Israel – or at least its elders – was given such a vision, in the wilderness, before embarking on a long marriage that was very much an up and down affair that included many periods of unfaithfulness and much heartache along the way, including periods of separation and exile. And after many, many years, out of the marriage of God and Israel came a Son, divine and human, whose destiny was to call the whole human race into a new covenant relationship of love and faithfulness, that would begin, as Israel's had, with a sacrifice and an altar, the blood poured out no longer sheep and bulls', but his own on an altar not of stone but of wood. And it is to that sacrifice in this season of Passiontide that we now turn our attention as our journey through the desert arrives at the foot of the hill of Calvary.