

Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> January 2018  
Epiphany 3, St Michael & All Angels, Barnes

### A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN

There was once a man who was rather unwell in hospital, and his devoted wife was by his side on the ward.

He said to her: *'Remember when you were with me that time I had that terrible accident?'*

*'Oh yes, I remember darling'* she replied.

*'And that time you were right by my side when I crashed the car coming home that night?'*

*'Of course, my love'* she said.

*'And you were also there when I had that operation that went a bit wrong'.*

His wife nodded and with her eyes filling with tears she took his hand, and then her husband looked up at her and said:

*'Do you know darling .... I think you're bad luck!'*

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### LOVING REAL PEOPLE

Marriage is rarely easy, at least not all of the time (as many of you will know) and when I prepare couples for marriage I ask them lots of questions

Where did you meet?

How long have you been together?

Why do you want to get married?

I ask these questions not to be nosey -

(although I must admit the answers are often very interesting - one couple I married met on a three-legged pub crawl!)

But I ask these questions to help them understand more about themselves and about marriage, and to relate both to God and their Christian faith.

I also ask every couple *'what do you like about each other'*.

Most of the time people have plenty to say (which is what you might expect!)

But then I ask them the opposite question – what do you *not* like about each other.

There's normally a few moments of awkward silence.  
They look at each other, then at the floor, and finally at me.  
Indeed, I would be worried if they answered too quickly,  
or get out a list saying, '*Well Father, where do I start!*'

You might think it's very odd and perhaps divisive to ask such a question,  
but I think it's the most important question that can be asked of any couple.

Because they are marrying a person,  
not some ideal or fantasy,

A real human being who has faults and failings.

And the miracle of marriage is not that people love each other for their virtues  
(it's easy to love the nice things about each other),

But that they love each other for their vices too.

To put it another way – they love someone not *in spite of their faults, but because of them*,

Because this is what makes them who they are.

This is absolutely central to a Christian marriage as it reflects something about God –  
Who loves us as we are for who we are.

### **TRANSFORMATION NOT REFORMATION**

You might remember that when Prince William and Katharine Middleton got married, the  
Bishop of London said in his sermon that marriage was about '*transformation not reformation*'.  
Not about changing each other, but being changed together.

It often surprises couples when I ask them what getting married will change.

Sometimes it's tempting to think of marriage as simply a public expression of a relationship that  
otherwise won't change very much – when in fact it changes just about everything.

It changes their relationship to each other.

It changes how their family, friends and community see them.

It changes them in the eyes of God as well.

We might rather grandly say, that a relationship takes on a cosmic and eternal dimension that it  
didn't have before.

That's what Sacraments like marriage do.

They change us on the *inside* so that we become different people from before.

That's why the miracle at Cana is the classic wedding reading – not because it's about a  
wedding – but because it's about *change*:

Jesus take something ordinary (the water)

And transforms it into something extraordinary (fine wine).

It's a story about the transformation that God's grace brings about in us and through our  
relationships with other people, and particularly our very closest and most loving relationships.

The Gospel says that it's a miracle that takes place on the third day.  
Where have we heard this before?  
Christ's first miracle of transformation,  
And his greatest miracle of resurrection  
Both happen on the third day.

And it's no accident that the jars are filled 'to the very brim'.  
In Jewish poetry a vessel represents a human life  
(You will recall the famous line in Psalm 23: 'My cup runneth over')  
and so these vessels represent God filling our lives  
with a vintage that works its transformation from within.  
A truth that you can taste on the tongue.

### **WINE OF GLADNESS**

If the jars represent a human life, then what does the wine mean?  
In the Old Testament, wine is a metaphor for rejoicing.  
The filling of the vessels specifically with wine is to say that Christ come to make our lives full of joy.

Life doesn't always feel that way, it has to be said.  
The Servant brings to the Steward what he thinks is only ordinary water.  
But turns out to be fine wine.  
Perhaps this tells us that we must keep faith with the apparently dull and unrelenting tasks of life - God can work in and through them to reveal his joy.

Jesus comes to the wedding feast with his disciples just after they have been called.  
They begin their journey of discipleship with Christ, not with a retreat or a sermon,  
But by attending a celebration of love.  
The best lesson there could be.

We celebrate a marriage, and we talk of celebrating the Sacraments.  
By definition you must celebrate with other people – It's very hard to celebrate on your own!  
A marriage is a public, communal event, it cannot take place in private or in secret;  
Banns must be called, witnesses must be present,  
All this speaks of an eternal truth – that marriage is a public celebration of the presence of God among us.

It is a tragic irony that marriage has, for some Christians, become the battleground for orthodoxy, and a source of discord both within the Church and with our wider culture that no longer regards gender as binary, and sexuality as fixed.

If Christians focused less on the gender of the participants, I wonder if we might find there are many other things that matter just as much for the meaning of marriage, if not more so – such as permanence, faithfulness and stability?

## REVEALING GLORY

The miracle of Cana is about change and joy, but also something else – glory.

It is the *'first of his signs that revealed his glory'*.

God reveals his glory through lives transformed by love.

This is an epiphany to have to hold.

God made manifest in the here and now of our daily lives,

In the humanity which is also his humanity too.

I love the old words of the Wedding Preface in the Prayer Book that says of marriage:

*'Which Christ adorned and beautified with his presence and first miracle that he wrought at Cana of Galilee'*.

He takes our human relationships, giving us, through them, a glimpse of heaven.

So a wedding is like heaven.

And heaven is like a wedding.

The Church recognizes that sometimes relationships and marriages do fail.

It's part of what it means to be human, and God knows and understands this too.

Nevertheless, it holds before us the vision of a wedding as the primary image of the Kingdom of God – and the Eucharist is the wedding feast.

The Bible begins with the relationship of Adam and Eve in Genesis,

But it culminates in the wedding banquet of the Lamb in Revelation.

There is no better image for heaven than a wedding party.

And the Eucharist is the beginning of that wedding party here on earth.

Every wedding, and every mass is a sign and foretaste of the joy that will be,

In this service, you are invited to the wedding banquet,

To be transformed by love

And filled with joy.

*'Blessed are those who are called the supper of the Lamb.'* Amen

*With thanks to Malcolm Guite's poem, 'The Miracle at Cana'.*