

Sermon for 8th February 2009
Celebration of the Gift of Marriage
1 Corinthians 13:1-13, John 2:1-11

Here are some words from a 1950s home economics book intended to prepare secondary school girls for married life:

1. **Have dinner ready.** Plan ahead to have a delicious meal – on time. This is a way of letting him know that you have been thinking about him and concerned about his needs.
2. **Prepare yourself.** Take 15 mins to rest so you will be refreshed when he arrives. Touch up your make-up, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh looking. Be a little gay and interesting. His boring day may need a lift.
3. **Clear away clutter.** Make one last trip through the house just before your husband arrives, gathering up school books, toys etc. Then run a duster over the tables. Your husband will feel he has reached a haven of rest and order.
4. **Prepare the children.** Take a few minutes to wash the children's hands and faces if they are small, comb their hair, and if necessary, change their clothes. They are little treasures and he would like to see them playing the part.
5. **Some DONT's.** Don't greet him with problems or complaints. Don't complain if he's late for dinner. Count this as minor compared with what he might have gone through that day.
6. **Make him comfortable.** Have him lean back in a comfortable chair or suggest he lies down in the bedroom. Arrange his pillows and offer to take off his shoes. Speak in a soft, soothing and pleasant voice. Allow him to relax and unwind.

I could go on, but you get the idea. When my husband arrives home to this scene, he knows he's gone to someone else's house.

How times have changed! Marriages might look rather different these days, but the gift of marriage is still important for individual lives and for society and something to be celebrated. And that's what we're doing today, during marriage week. We're delighted to have with us some of the couples being married here this year, and some who were married here last year.

Marriage gets a bit of a bad press these days. But although the popular perception may be that modern marriages don't last, in fact two out of every three first marriages last until one partner dies, and one in two subsequent marriages will also last a lifetime. And did you know that over 90% of young people in the UK aspire to be married at some point in the future, and the large majority will achieve this. The pattern of marriage may have changed, with many couples coming to marriage later in life, possibly after living together for a period, after buying their home or starting a family, seeing marriage as a celebration of the stability of their relationship rather than the beginning of a relationship, but marriage is still an important choice for most couples: a public declaration of their commitment to each other.

The shame is that with the wedding industry in full swing it's often rather difficult for couples to focus on the marriage rather than the wedding. Because the wedding day, no matter how long it is in preparation, is just a day, it's the marriage that is the life-time adventure.

We heard earlier the two most commonly chosen bible readings for wedding services: that beautiful description of unselfish love from 1 Corinthians, which sets out for us a wonderful pattern for life and a good basis for a marriage where two people live in such close proximity that they soon discover that real love is not as easy as saying those three little words 'I love you'. That real love is about being there through thick and thin, through sickness and health, riches and poverty, as the marriage vows remind us. That real love is not jealous or easily angered, but self-giving, patient and kind; this is the love that is set out for us as a pattern for our relationships, the love that is embodied in God himself, as we are reminded in the first words spoken in this service and in many wedding service: God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.

Then in our gospel reading we have a picture of the love of God, because we see Jesus as a guest at a wedding. I expect that wedding at Cana had been planned and fretted over just as much as most weddings today. The ceremony had, no doubt, gone well - hopefully the preacher hadn't gone on for too long - and the newlyweds had arrived at the reception with their guests. You might wonder why Jesus would be at a wedding. Wouldn't he be too busy being holy somewhere, to mix with ordinary people? The answer is no, he wouldn't! Jesus loved being with ordinary people, and especially celebrating with them. It's only what you'd expect - that God who had such fun creating the world and its people, would delight in being with them at a celebration - that God whose whole being is defined by love, would want to share the wonder of a couple's love by joining in their wedding.

But imagine the embarrassment when the host discovered the planning had gone wrong and they'd run out of wine. This was a real problem, a real need, and Jesus was there for this family, and this couple in their difficulties and needs. It might not seem a very important need to us, but it was crucial to that couple at that point, and Jesus met their need. Quietly, he slipped behind the bar and somehow transformed ordinary water into finest wine. Not just a few bottles, but 600 litres - that's scandalously generous if you think about it. That's how much Jesus cared about the worries of ordinary people. Turning water into wine wasn't a clever party trick, Jesus turned worry into joy, and the anxious expressions of the wedding party into laughter.

Those of us who are married, and those who have seen real marriages at close quarters, know that there are times in any marriage where there are problems and worries. It's at times like these that we need to know that Jesus wants to be part of our relationships because he loves us that much, he even wants to be part of our relationships when they're going wrong. Because he wants to turn our worries into joy, and our problems into laughter.

My husband will no doubt be relieved to hear that I'm still looking for the secret to a happy and successful marriage, but I suspect that there's really no secret formula like a recipe for a cake. I suspect that a happy marriage is based in hard work, patience and generous amount of forgiveness, as the reading from Corinthians reminds us. And I suspect a fulfilled marriage is about being generous to each other, really caring for the concerns and needs of the other, and allowing the power of the God of love to work within us so that we can share love with each other.

Blessings,
Gill