

Sermon

One of the reasons weddings are so much fun is the opportunity they provide for folk to get dressed up for a fantastic party. As you can see, the groomsmen look beautiful; so do the bridesmaids. The clergy team have availed themselves of the opportunity to dress up in all their finery! But of course, none of us here can eclipse the beauty of the bride, or her bride gown. I am sure that Anna and Peter have worn themselves out with the planning for today. Well now that we are all here, there is nothing that can go wrong from this point on. All we have to do is enjoy the day and make the most of this wonderful celebration.

What is Christian marriage all about? As you can see, the church is in the middle of celebrating the season of Christmas; the season we give thanks for the gift of Jesus, God coming among us as a human being. The reason that Jesus came among us is that God longs to be united with us in a communion of love and trust. What better way to do that than to come as a human being so that he can relate to us on our level and speak to us in our language. It is precisely here at this point that we begin to understand what Christian marriage is. Marriage is none other than the mystery of God's love being lived out in its fullness in a

human partnership of commitment and trust, so that the couple become for us all, a visible sign of God. A marriage is another point where the incarnation happens again and again as all over the world Christ is enfleshed in loving relationships of commitment and trust.

Anna and Peter, you are a sign of God for us today. Just as God loves the creation and is utterly faithful to it and loves it to bits, your love for each other and your commitment to each other is a visible sign for us of God's covenant love between God and creation. Be that sign for us today and all your days together as a married couple.

For you have both opened your hearts to one another and have found the courage to offer and receive total commitment from each other. Now you are trusting that love and commitment enough to offer your whole lives to each other. You are promising to give everything, even life itself, to each other. This is the kind of love that is a magnificent reflection of God's love. No wonder you are happy to tell the world about it, and that we are all here to witness and to celebrate that love. This is what is at the heart of Christian marriage.



To put it another way, a husband and wife are called to be Christ for each other, which is why Peter and Anna have chosen the gospel reading from John today. The kind of love that John's gospel talks about is a mutual partnership of intimacy.

Within this circle of love all mutually give and receive love to and from the other. It is best expressed in this ICON of the Trinity. Here there is a community of equals in a communion of love. They sit in a circle which means no one is at the head of the table; no one can be the boss. When you look at the eyes, each member of this circle of love is focused on another in the circle. All give equally and all receive equally. In marriage, the couple are a visible echo of the Trinity, and they become ministers of Christ to each other. As we heard in the reading, the kind of love that Christ gives is a costly love, the kind of love that will refuse to run away when life is hard. As St Paul puts it,

this is a love that bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It is a love that never ends (1 Cor 13:7-8). Christ laid down his life for his friends. In marriage God gives us the grace to do the same; to lay down our lives for our wife or husband. Whenever we do that, our marriages become places where the Kingdom of God is made manifest. The image of God becomes visible in our lives. That is why marriage is called a sacrament. The lives of a married couple become an outward sign of a hidden mystery; God is made visible for the world. How natural it is, therefore, that today we will celebrate Eucharist today with Anna and Peter. The Eucharist is the meal of the very kingdom that is being made manifest before our eyes; a meal Christ has given us so that we might be united with him forever; a meal that celebrates costly love; a meal that shows us how to share and what forgiveness and reconciliation looks like.

In his book, *World of Stories*, William J. Bausch has a list of "do's" and "don'ts" which I would like to pass on. He thinks that you, Anna and Peter, ought to be the following: you should be good chemists, bad mathematicians, good humourists, realists and pray-ers.

Being good chemists: We often think of the chemistry of a love relationship. When the chemistry is right, everything clicks and goes well. When the chemistry is poor, things don't gel, the bubble deflates and things go flat. Chemistry is no magic. It is something we create. Married couples need to be creative. They have to mix the ingredients like a master chef. They need to know when things are over done or under done, when something needs to be changed or something new needs to be added to renew the heart. When they see the need for a change they also need the wisdom to do something about it.

While being good at chemistry, it's equally important to be a poor mathematician. In other words, don't keep a score card. God doesn't keep scores. Why should we? God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love... (Psalm 103:8). So, put more into the relationship than you wish to take out of it. Look out for "number 2" more than for "number 1". Be ready to forgive each other rather than to judge. Jesus has another proverb which is instructive: "Judge not and you will not be judged; condemn not and you will not be condemned, forgive, and you will be forgiven; give and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over will be

put into your lap." (Luke 6: 37-38). Be a good mathematician only in the area of budgeting!

Humour is important in a healthy marriage. See the funny side of things. Keep the ability to laugh at your own selves every now and then. And be realists. We all know you are both angels from heaven! But none of us is perfect and there will be trials and tough times ahead which will remind you both of your human limitations, show up the parts of you that need to grow and mature. Indeed, marriage could be seen as a crucible within which all our immaturities and weaknesses will have to be faced. Of course, this is where forgiveness constantly provides space for restoration and renewal. God gives us the grace we need to enable us to move ever deeper into a communion of love.

Finally, be a couple who pray together. Someone once said: The family that prays together, stays together. Do make time for devotional prayers as a couple, or for meditation, or for theological discussion. What ever form of prayer best nurtures you, engage in it together and grow together in your relationship with God.

Dear Anna and Peter, may your love grow. May you be loving and wise parents for Charlotte and Hannah. We are glad to join with you in celebrating your marriage and we will stand by you in good times and bad. May God bless you in your marriage. May it be a source of great joy for you both, and for us who love you dearly.