

BRINGING GOD INTO LIFE'S SPECIAL OCCASIONS

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Earlier this year two of our church members asked me to conduct a service of thanksgiving on the occasion of their golden wedding prior to a celebratory lunch.. There were hymns - the couple had chosen 'Now thank we all our God' and 'Lord for the years your love has kept and guided'. There were Scripture readings -Psalm 121, a psalm of pilgrimage, & 1 Cor 13, the so-called hymn to love – together with an amusing Frank Topping extract, all read by family members; as also prayers led by the family too. And of course, there was a brief address in which we reflected on how in all the ups and downs of the last fifty years God had been with them. In this respect I had asked the couple to sum up their life together within the compass of a sheet of A4.. The service came to a close as the congregation together recited Numbers 6.24-26 as a blessing on the couple. It was a great occasion, with a wide cross-section of family and friends in attendance. Many of those present were committed Christians – but others were not. And of those who were not, all without exception were deeply impressed by the way in which the service linked this couple's faith with the realities of everyday life. Would that I were given more opportunities to bring God into family life. In this respect I remember hosting a meeting for ministers when the subject of anniversaries came up. We were acknowledging that one of the great privileges ministers have is being invited to events at which special milestones in the lives of families or individuals belonging to our church family are being celebrated. Yet at the same time we were expressing our surprise, as also our sadness, that all too often we are not called upon to say a word or to read a Scripture or to pray on such an occasion. Why is it, we wondered, that many Christian people seem to forget to bring God into a party? Surely nothing should be more natural than to thank God for his goodness in the past, and to pray for God's blessing in the future. It would give any minister the greatest of pleasures to pray for and rejoice with friends in this way. Perhaps we ministers are in part to blame. Maybe we should be more pro-active and actually offer our services. On reflection, its not simply anniversaries or special birthdays where we ministers would love to be involved. There are all kinds of other 'rites of passage' where we ministers can be used: it might be an engagement party or a retirement celebration, a house-warming or a farewell party for a child leaving home for university. Or it might not be a 'rite of passage' at all: it could be a fund-raising lunch or a simple supper party, where all that might be appropriate is for the minister to be asked to say grace. As a minister I have always been grateful for the opportunity to bring God into family life. What's more, it always leads into all kinds of conversations about the Christian faith.