

A SURPRISE WEDDING

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Last Sunday afternoon we had a surprise wedding. Over 120 guests came to church for what they thought was a tea party, but to their surprise their hosts announced that they were getting married – there and then! Even more of a surprise was the fact that most people thought the couple concerned were married – for not only did they have children, they also shared the same surname. So it really was a surprise!

Unlike an Anglican church, where banns are read within the context of public worship, people wanting to get married in a Nonconformist church have to put up their banns in the local registrar's office. There, of course, the banns are on public display – but reality is that few people take notice of these banns. So, it is not difficult to keep a wedding a secret.

As an authorised person, as also as their pastor, my task was to marry the happy couple. The situation in which they found themselves was somewhat complex. For one there had been a messy divorce, for the other there had been a long-drawn out problem with contact – and so, at the time, the best thing had seemed for the woman to move in with her beloved, changing her name by deed poll in the process. They had always wanted to get married – but then yet other factors arose, and so there was yet further delay. But then the 'wife' wanted to be baptised, and at that point it seemed to me that we needed to 'regularise' the situation. So at last we did.

Needless to say, the couple concerned got many plaudits – everybody was so delighted to share in the joy of the occasion. Somewhat unusually, I too got a host of plaudits. Let me quote from just two emails. One of my young deacons wrote: "Just wanted to drop you a quick note to say thank you. Before this afternoon's wedding I was thinking what a tough job you were about to have, and I was amazed (though not surprised!) by how sensitively you handled it. I very much appreciated what you said to Petronella and Rupert [the names have been changed!] on behalf of the Church - that they are loved, respected, valued and prayed for - Amen!". Similarly a woman in her 50s wrote: "I know I told you on Sunday but I just need to tell you again that was the best most sensitive sermon I have heard - thank you and well done!". Wow! In the light of those comments I thought that it might be worthwhile reproducing the sermon I preached – in the hope that it might be of help to other ministers who might find themselves in a similar situation:-

Four marks of a Christian marriage (Romans 12.9-12)

Rupert and Petronella – what a day it has been! First Petronella was baptised – and now a surprise wedding. What a great day of celebration it is!

But what on earth would God have me to say to you today? That was the question which faced me when I sat down to prepare for your wedding. As I reflected on the Scriptures you had

chosen for this service, God seemed to nudge me toward preaching on your second reading: Romans 12.9-12. Clearly Paul did not have a wedding in mind – he was writing to a church. But nonetheless within the context of today’s wedding I believe that God would have me talk about four marks of a Christian marriage:

1. Truthfulness combined with openness
2. Love combined with respect
3. Enthusiasm combined with hard work
4. Hope combined with patience

Needless to say they are not the only marks – but these four things came to mind as I read this passage in the context of today

1. Truthfulness combined with openness

“**Love must be completely genuine**” (v9) says the Apostle. So reads the Good News Bible. Literally Paul says, “*love must be without ‘hypocrisy’*”. In classical Greek the word for an actor is the word from which we get our word ‘hypocrite’: actors in those days used to hold masks and act out their part – the mask would enable the actor to pretend to be something which they weren’t. Paul says, ‘*away with masks*’, ‘*away with pretence*’. Love must be real.

This afternoon we have witnessed a putting aside of masks. Many of us presumed that you were married – and if the truth be told, some of us are still in a state of shock on discovering that although to all practical intents and purposes you were husband and wife, for reasons which may have made sense at the time, you never actually tied the knot. But today you have taken the bold step of not only admitting that things were not 100% right in your relationship – you have gone ahead and formally committed yourselves to one another before us.

This afternoon I want to honour you both for your openness and truthfulness, as also for your guts. Indeed, I am sure that I speak on behalf of all of us and say the more we know about you, the more we admire you.

“*Love must be without hypocrisy*” – it must be “**completely genuine**”. What is true of church life, must be true of married life too.

2. Love combined with respect

“**Love one another warmly**”(v10), says Paul. Well that’s a pretty obvious thing to say to a married couple. A marriage relationship which is cold and frigid is a very sorry state of affairs.

However, please note Paul combines love with respect: “**be eager to show respect to one another**” – or as the NRSV renders it: “**outdo one another in showing honour**”. Sadly, all too

often couples can take one another for granted. However, a relationship not based on respect is ultimately doomed to failure.

In preparing for this sermon I discovered that there is an American marriage outfit entitled *Love and Respect*, the leaders of which maintain that men should love their wives, and women should respect their husbands. They support their argument on the basis of their research which apparently reveals that during marital conflict a husband most often reacts when feeling disrespected and a wife reacts when feeling unloved: *'We asked 7,000 people this question: when you are in a conflict with your spouse or significant other, do you feel unloved or disrespected? 83% of the men said "disrespected." 72% of the women said, "unloved"'*. Personally I find that distinction unhelpful – love and respect are incumbent on both men and women.

3. Enthusiasm combined with hard work

Paul says: **“Work hard and do not be lazy. Serve the Lord with a heart full of devotion”** (v11). I confess that when I first read those words, I could not see any relevance to marriage. Paul was encouraging the members of the church at Rome to be enthusiastic in their service of God – to which as a pastor I want to say ‘Amen’. But I find it difficult to apply this word to Rupert and Petronella, not least because my experience of them is that they are wholehearted in their service of God.

But let me take these words out of context and apply them to marriage. Without enthusiasm and hard work, marriages can be dull affairs. Alas, the older we grow, the less enthusiastic we become. *“Enthusiasm”*, it has been said, is *“a distemper of youth, curable by small doses of repentance in connection with outward applications of experience”* (Ambrose Bierce). Rupert and Petronella, don’t let the ageing process get in your way. Don’t lose your zest for life – and in particular don’t lose your zest for one another.

One way of combatting marriage fatigue, is by working at your relationship. Marriage is a bit like gardening. Just as you can’t leave a garden to nature – it becomes a wilderness if you don’t weed regularly – similarly you can’t leave a marriage to chance. You need to make time for one another, you need to ensure that you do things together. Rupert and Petronella – you know all this. Just keep on putting it into practice.

4. Hope combined with patience

Finally, Paul says: **“Let your hope keep you joyful, be patient in your troubles, and pray at all times”**(v12). Sadly, more than most of us, you both know what trouble can be.

The Authorised Version speaks of *'tribulation'*: the underlying Greek word comes from a verb meaning to 'squeeze, to compress, to crunch'. Yes, there are times when we seem to be going through the mill – the pressure becomes intolerable. What then? Paul says "**Be patient... and pray**". This is not just about grinning and bearing it – but believing that even in the worst that life can throw at us God is at work, bringing good out of evil. Indeed, this is what Paul says in Rom 8. 28: "*We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him*".

Rupert and Petronella, I have no idea of what the future holds for you – whether or not, for instance, Rupert you will find the justice you deserve. But whether it be in this world or the next, I believe that one day right will out.

In the meantime, one good thing which surely has come out of your troubles is that God has blessed you with a host of new friends, many of whom are here today. We want to say to you both: we love you, we respect you, and we will continue to pray for God's best for you.

A concluding reflection for readers of Ministry Today

So what do you think? Clearly the usual wedding sermon would not have done. The other Scripture chosen for the service was Ecclesiastes 4.9-12, a wonderful passage which speaks not just of the advantages of being two, but also of the strength of a threefold cord: but while appropriate for couples setting out on life together, it did not fit a situation where the couple had been together for many years.

I wanted to say something based on Scripture – and not simply share a few witticisms followed by an expression of best wishes. As ministers of the Gospel we are first and foremost preachers of the Word. I confess that at times I indulged in a degree of *eisegesis*, rather than *exegesis* – and as a result I wonder whether the Apostle Paul would have agreed with the thrust of my sermon?

What's more, I sought to grapple with some of the realities of the situation. Although it was not appropriate to highlight the difficulties the couple had faced, to have ignored that there had been issues would have been tantamount to pretence. As a pastor I cannot afford to play games.

On reflection, with God's help, I believe I managed to hit the spot. It was a most happy wedding day!

Paul Beasley-Murray

