

ROMANS 12.9-12: FOUR MARKS OF A CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

[On the occasion of the wedding of David and Nicki Lee: Chelmsford 30 September 2012]

David and Nicki – what a day it has been!

First Nicki 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 OPENESS

“Love must be completely genuine” (v9) says the Apostle. So reads the GNB.

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 David & Nicki, 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).

David and Nicki, 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. David & Nicki – 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”*.

David and Nicki, I have no idea of what the future holds for you – whether or not, for instance, David 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.

