

1 COR 13.4-8a: A WEDDING SERMON

[Chelmsford 2 April 2011]

Congratulations on your marriage. How splendidly turned out both of you are today! We trust that God will richly bless your new life together, and that you will know much happiness in your marriage. But how realistic is such a sentiment? In today's Britain, where almost one in two marriages break down, that can seem to be wishful thinking.

At the moment you are both starry-eyed. You both think you're the cats-whiskers. The bride thinks her new husband is the most wonderful man in the world, and bridegroom can't imagine a more adorable woman than his wife!

Alas, the time will come the dream will be over. *'Love'*, its been said, "*is a temporary insanity, curable by marriage*" (Ambrose Pierce). *'Love is the triumph of imagination over intellect'* (HL Mencken). Or in the words of John Barrymore, *'Love is the delightful interval between meeting a beautiful girl and discovering that she looks like a haddock'*. Yes, at some stage the bubble will burst, and you will discover that neither of you is the ultimate in perfection. Then what?

I believe that the secret of any lasting marriage is a four-letter word called love – and in particular the love of which Paul wrote in his hymn to love found in 1 Cor 13: **“Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs... Love never gives up; and its faith, hope and patience never fail”**.

Paul wrote these words to a church where relationships were far from right, where there were some very real disagreements. But these words are also applicable to marriage. For love is the key to all successful relationships.

But what is this love about which Paul speaks? Hollywood equates love with sex; Mills and Boon equates love with romantic slush. The confectionary industry equates love with giving him your last Rolo. The love of which Paul speaks, however, is the kind of love which Jesus had for us.

Let me be frank with you. The key to a good marriage is not having great sex. True sex is part of the deal, but heaven help a marriage if sexual performance is the basis of that relationship. No marriage could survive if sex were the foundation.

But if sex is not the key, neither is the key to a good marriage just being good friends. True, no marriage will survive without the couple being good friends – but friendship alone is not enough. For, if you are like most couples, there will be times when you will let one another down, times when even the best of friendships is tested.

No, the key to a good marriage is self-giving love, the love that we see in Jesus, the love that gives not because the other deserves love, but simply because they are there to be loved. Marriage comes about as a result of a couple falling in love – but a marriage will not normally survive if it is dependent upon the couple remaining in love. For marriage is not about feeling love, but rather about being committed to loving, whatever.

So, with this in mind, let's see what the Apostle Paul has to say about love.

1. *Love is putting the other person first*

“Love is not jealous or conceited or proud – love is not selfish”. I.e. love is not about me and my needs, it is about you and your needs. Love is not about wanting the best for me, but about wanting the best for you. Love is about putting the other first.

As Zsa Zsa Gabor once said: *“Husbands are like fires. They go out when unattended”*. Or let me quote Leonard Bernstein, the great American composer and conductor: he was once asked what was the hardest instrument to play. Without hesitation he replied: *“Second fiddle. I can always get plenty of first violins, but to find one who plays second fiddle with as much enthusiasm, or second French horn or second flute, now that’s a problem. And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony”*. Are you willing to play second fiddle – not once, but constantly. For that is what love is about. It is about putting the other person first.

2. *Love is forgiving the other*

“Love does not keep a record of wrongs” (v5). I’m told that in Polynesia it is customary for people to keep some reminders of their hatred. Articles are suspended from the roofs of their huts to keep alive the memory of their wrongs – real or imaginary. Sadly it is not only in Polynesia that people nurse their wrath to keep it warm. I have known some husbands and wives to keep a mental black book of the other’s misdemeanours.

But love is about forgiving. Woody Allen’s marriage might have lasted had he learnt to forgive. As it was he said of his wife: *“She was so immature. She kept sinking the boats in my bath”*. All so trivial, and yet time and again it is the trivial which sinks the marriage. Saying sorry and forgiving each other is something we all need to learn. In this respect Ogden Nash had some wise advice for husbands:

*“To keep your marriage brimming with love in the marriage cup,
Whenever you’re wrong, admit it; whenever you’re right, shut up”*

3. *Love is unending*

“Love never gives up” – “Love knows no limit to its endurance” (JBP) – **“There is nothing which love cannot face”** (REB). True love is unending.

On one occasion a couple asked me to marry them – but then went on to say that they could only commit themselves to a 10 year marriage. But today you have promised to love one another ‘until death do us part’. Marriage is a life-sentence. You have committed yourself to one another, not for the duration, but for as long as you both shall love. Just as there is no ending to the circle of gold on your finger, so there should be no ending to your loving.

In other words, we are called to love like Jesus. It has often been said that 1 Cor 13 is a description of the person of Jesus. Jesus never gave up on anybody – not even on Judas. Jesus loved us to the end – even to dying for us on a Cross. In a way which is true of nobody else, Jesus gave of himself to us – and in giving of himself, he forgave even the worst of hurts against him.

Needless to say, if you are to learn to love one another with the love of Jesus, then you need to put Jesus at the centre of your marriage

- Only then can you put each other first
- Only then can you forgive each other
- Only then can you keep on loving.