

Renewal of Marriage Vows 14 February 2010

Last Sunday, Richard and I met the couples who hope to be married, here, at Holy Trinity this year. We shall meet them each twice again before their wedding day. Firstly, to get to know them a little better and to help prepare them for their married life together, then again, shortly before the wedding day itself for a rehearsal of the marriage service.

In my experience, the rehearsal is usually much more difficult than the actual wedding day. The couple arrive very stressed with all their last minute preparations; they do not know how the service will run and one or other of them will have unrealistic expectations. Take this example for instance:

During one wedding rehearsal, the groom approached a Vicar with an unusual offer.

"Look, I'll give you £100 if you'll change the wedding vows. When you get to part where I'm to promise to 'love her, honour her, and 'forsaking all others, be faithful to her forever,' I'd appreciate it if you'd just leave that part out." He passed the clergyman the cash and walked away satisfied.

On the day of the wedding, when the bride and groom moved to that part of the ceremony where the vows are exchanged, the vicar looked the young man in the eye and said:

"Will you promise to prostrate yourself before her, obey her every command and wish, serve her breakfast in bed every morning of your life and swear eternally before God

and your lovely wife that you will not ever even look at another woman, as long as you both shall live?"

The groom gulped and looked around, and said in a tiny voice,

"I will." He then leaned toward the vicar and hissed, "I thought we had a deal."

The vicar put the £100 into his hand and whispered back, "She made me a much better offer."

Of course, neither Richard nor I would succumb to such bribery! However, the joke does illustrate the fact that some couples enter into marriage with the wrong ideas or unrealistic expectations of how they are going to live together!

All of us here married a stranger. We may have thought that we knew our partner but it takes a lifetime to get to know the mystery of another person. Also, people are changed by the circumstances of life. If we are to abide by our vows of taking each other for better for worse, for richer for poorer and in sickness and in health as we live and change with each other, we need guidelines which will help us to continue to love with one another and "to forsake all others for as long as we both shall live." Well, if marriage is a school for love, then there should be the equivalent of the three R's to help us in our education. There are, but instead of three R's we have three F's! These 3F's will ensure that our married relationship continues to grow and develop in love. Those vital, three F's are:

Forgiveness, Faithfulness and Fun!

In the Seventies, there was a cult film called Love Story which featured Ryan O'Neil and Ali McGraw. It was a real weepie because the young, immensely beautiful, character played by Ali, developed a terminal disease and the couple were parted all too soon by her death. The strap line for the film was:

"Love is never having to say you are sorry."

I remember thinking at the time that this was ridiculous and I still do. There are times when we need to let go of our pride or step down from our high horse and apologize to our partners. Love means we *will* have to say sorry sometimes.

My view is that the strap line *should* have read:

"Love means that you do not have to keep on saying you are sorry!"

That is because forgiveness is such a vital part of a loving relationship. As Christians we believe that Jesus Christ took our sins upon himself on the cross, so that whenever we do wrong and are truly sorry, we can come to God and ask for forgiveness and God will forgive us. God will wipe out the sin as if it had never existed. This is something we can do for one another as married people in Christ. We can try to forgive as if the wrong never existed. Forgiveness does not mean grudgingly holding on to the hurt to be brought up at another time of marital friction. It means facing the hurt we have done to one another, voicing it, owning it, being sorry for it, then putting it away for good. Yes, we will hurt each other again but each time we forgive our partner we are providing a fresh start for our marriage, and new life for one another.

The second F, faithfulness, is a tricky word. Most people associate unfaithfulness with a little nooky on the side; having sex with someone other than our partner and, although this kind of unfaithfulness can do great damage to a marriage and can seriously undermine trust in one another, it is not usually the major unfaithfulness that causes so many marriages to flounder or have rocky patches. That is because there are as many ways of being unfaithful as there are personalities. When things get tough, when home life becomes a bit of a battleground with sleepless children, stropy adolescents, sickness or lack of money, it is all too easy to seek pleasure and satisfaction outside the marriage, or a means of escape from the troubles at home. Often, the things that we choose seem harmless in themselves. We develop a passion for golf or football, maybe our work and ambition take a new urgent turn and we have to spend more and more time away from home. Maybe our friendships with our old friends that we have neglected a bit of late become increasingly important and we find ourselves spending more time talking to our friends on the phone or over a glass of wine, than we do to our husband. All of these are examples of how unfaithfulness creeps into our marriage. None of them is wrong in itself. It's just that they mask the real reason why we are spending less time with our partner and what we might be avoiding. So looking to be faithful means looking to see who is, at present, the most important person or element in our lives, which should always be our spouse. A very wise monk wrote to my husband before his ordination saying: "Do not regard your marriage and family life as a pull on your vocation and ministry but rather as the centre from which the ripples of your priesthood should flow". These were very perceptive words, indeed!

Which brings us to our final f: Fun! I would say that fun in a marriage is like bubbles in champagne. It is what gives it its zest and stops it being flat. AND YOU NEED TO KEEP ON HAVING FUN TOGETHER throughout your married life. Whether you have been married five, fifteen or fifty five years, you need to make time to enjoy each other's company. Mutual laughter is a great cement for the bricks of a relationship. So continue to make time to find things that you enjoy doing together, even if it just curling up on the sofa together with a bottle of wine and a dvd when the children have finally gone to sleep. Mutual fun is SO vital. When our children were young we could only manage to get away on our own about once every three or four years and then only for a day or so. But how I remember those times! The mad dash to the Edinburgh festival where we sat together in a coffee bar and read the newspapers uninterrupted for the first time in years; or sitting outside Westminster Cathedral in London swigging cheap wine from a carafe and eating Brie and a baguette with the aid of a penknife and the first time we got to see a film starting at 7.30pm, together, while someone else put the kids to bed. These are memories of rare, sweet delights which we will share together in our old age.

Forgiveness, faithfulness and fun. What do our three Vital F's add up to? They add up to the kind of love that deepens from being smitten by cupid's dart and the initial sexual attraction into something even more wonderful.- a contentment to be wholly oneself, deeply loved and accepted by each other and by God. There was once a wonderful poster issued by the missionary society, U.SP.G. which showed an ancient, Chinese couple, sitting side by side on a bench, grinning. The caption above the photograph read:

"Do not be cynical about love for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is as perennial as the grass."

I have treasured that picture in my mind as a hope for my own married life. Like the Simon and Garfunkle song I hope that the practice of forgiveness, faithfulness and fun will lead to us being old friends, sat on a park bench, enjoying each other's company, loving the world, ourselves and each other through the wonderful love that God has given us to share throughout our married lives. My prayer for you, as you renew your vows here in church, tonight, is that you will be renewed in the love you share with one another through God's marvellous grace and mercy and that it will continue until the end of your days. Amen

Elaine Dando