

The church and Love

The family gathered, and none of the usual family tensions that are present when the disparate family come together were visible...on the surface at least.

Photographs taken we head for the cars to go for the first part of the day, and what we consider to be the least important part, the legal ceremony at the registry office.

All is going well. Some of the more senior members of the family have arrived at the registry office, we have the rest with us. And then the shout goes up, whose got the rings?!!

I, as that is my want, panic, the car is turned around and we race back down the A45 to retrieve the rings. Racing back and trying to keep calm the anxiety of those already there, we make swift progress to the registry office. We arrive on time. Phew, disaster avoided.

We walk into the arrival of the Queen of Sheba - well why not! It's the only thing they have that feels at all appropriate! The ceremony unfolds and now we are at the legal words...we hear the registrar declare on behalf of the state that we are husbands, that our love is recognised and validated by the state and the tears roll down our faces. It is unexpectedly and profoundly powerful to have our love validated in this way. For it to be recognised by society after so many years of struggle by others on our behalf.

If only the church of England could stop wringing its hands, untwist its knickers and do the same, many of us, if not all of us here today would be very grateful.

Despite the church of England, and its continual rejection of us, and in the knowledge that it will deny me a license to preside at Communion and lead a church, its rejection of same sex couples across the country who would love to have their love recognised in church, we choose to have part two of our ceremony here at All Saints. With our people, for it is all of you who have loved and supported, cajoled, comforted and encouraged us in the years preceded, and indeed in the years since. Thank you. I can honestly say on behalf of us both that we wouldn't be where we are today with out you and your love and support and encouragement.

And we wouldn't be where we are today without the blessing of God. For while the church of England rejects couples like us amidst begrudging platitudes, God is love and his love is poured out upon his people, upon us in abundance.

On that day, the 4th January 2020, as we witness so many family and friends gather at All Saints, representatives of every stage in our lives express their

love and support and the rainbow candles are lit on the altar, as the songs are sung and we exchange vows, we are blessed. We are blessed by love, love for one another, love from others and love from God.

We were not legally married here as we so dearly wish we could have been, but that has in no way for us diminished our sense of blessing that we received here in All Saints from God on that day, or since.

So many have worked on this exhibition this weekend, and I want to thank you for putting it together and of telling the story of marriages here at all saints over many years. I have so enjoyed reading the stories and seeing the various exhibits....and also by displaying Nicola and Rosie's wedding clothes and their story, by displaying our clothes and story and inviting me to preach this morning, we are also acknowledging the pain that they represent, that church does not yet fully recognise the love between all people for one another. It perhaps also tells of a hope for the future that it might just do so.

My hope and prayer is that the church might finally recognise and celebrate love in all its fullness and if such an exhibition was to be put on again in 20 years our story, Rosie and Nicola's story of their Civil Partnership might be viewed as an important part of the journey to fully celebrating love in all its fullness.

Of course it is not just same sex couples who can sense rejection by the church. For many years the church refused to conduct the marriages of those who were divorced, and I myself remember that 23 years ago when I was first ordained in my diocese we still had to seek the permission of the bishop to marry those who were divorced. The reality was that if I refused to conduct the marriages of those who had been divorced, I would have conducted very few over the years! Perhaps you have experienced that pain of rejection as my parents did, or have gone through the terrible pain of marriage failure and divorce yourself.

I today could have told you another story, of a young man who had just turned 23 who had a sleepless night before his marriage at St. Andrews Enfield in London on the 3rd April 1993 to a young woman by the name of Penny. That of course was me, a union which went on to produce three wonderful children Georgina, William and Jenny. And which 25 years later ended in divorce amidst so much pain.

This weekend we are surrounded by beautiful and historic objects of marriage that represent a Moment in time, that represent love and joy. And yet for some of us here today the theme of marriage also brings a sense of great pain. The dreadful pain that comes from failed marriages and relationships. From abusive marriages. From rejection by the church and others. From bereavement after a happy marriage. The pain of longing for a life partner and instead living a

single life. The sense that having lived with a partner for many years but choosing not to marry you sense that you are seen in the eyes of the church as lesser than.

The church pays so much attention to marriage as the only expression for love and fulfilment that it fails to truly celebrate love in all its forms and in all its fullness. And lets be honest it's not really about marriage it's because it cannot have a grown up and honest acceptance of sex! It hasn't always been like that.

For the first 1000 years or more after Christ's death and resurrection, the church was not involved in marriage in any way. Marriage was all about relationships and took place in the families home or in the villages. Same sex partnerships were not unheard of. The 'marriage of friends' not unheard of. Celebrations of love were common place and the village elder would fast the hands of two people together, bound together in love.

From about the 11th century, how much money the brides family had was important as was securing economic or political advantage, but the Benedictine Monk, Gratian instead that the couples consent was most important. IT was not until the 13th century that the clergy would bless a marriage, but even then not in church, they would come to a couples home. It wasn't until 1563 that the church decided it wanted in on the act of marriage, and set about trying to dictate who could and couldn't marry and where and when they could do. It was only in this year that marriage, for was officially deemed to be one of the seven sacraments, though there had been an underlying assumption that it was one for a few hundred years.

It was only in 1753 in the Clandestine Marriage Act that the state combined with the church to require all couples to be married in church or chapel or the marriage was declared void. Only in 1836 were non religious ceremonies allowed in a registry office, but were often looked down upon as second class by the establishment.

And so in real terms, the church's obsession with marriage as the only proper way that a loving relationship can be expressed is relatively recent. Lets look briefly at our readings, all of which I am sure have been used at numerous All Saints Wedding ceremonies over the years.

Our reading from the first letter of John reminds us that God is love, and that love is poured out upon each and everyone of us, irrespective of who we are, what we have done or who we love. It remind us that's Gods love is so great that they sacrificed their son Jesus for us that we might know that love. That love is for all people. It does not say that God will only love those who have married, or can have children as our outdated wedding ceremony still states - the gift of marriage is for the procreation of children...I'm sure those who marry

in their more senior years would not thank you for a child to come along! Or for the church to say you can't marry because you can't have children.

It does not say that God only loves those who marry someone of the opposite gender or that God's love is withdrawn if you divorce. No God is love and their love is poured out on each of us. And then love as God has loved. Love, fall in love. Have loving and fulfilling relationships. And be blessed.

Our Gospel reading hammers home the point, God is love, and now love each other in the same way. My favourite reading of today, however is our old testament reading from Song of Songs, and one that was read at the marriage of Harry and Megan, and preached on by Michael Curry.

The author, the poet who wrote these beautiful words describes the very qualities of love that comes from God and that can be aroused in people. Powerful images are used of love being as strong as death, love being like a burning fire, and which can never be quenched.

In his sermon Michael Curry drew on the words of Teilhard de Chardin, the French Jesuit priest, scientist and scholar who had this to say about the power of fire and of love:

“Fire to a great extent made human civilization possible. Fire made it possible to cook food....[and] to heat warm environments... there was no Bronze Age without fire, no Iron Age without fire, no Industrial Revolution without fire. Fire makes it possible for us to text and tweet and email and Instagram....

de Chardin said fire was one of the greatest discoveries in all of human history. And he then went on to say that if humanity ever captures the energy of love – it will be the second time in history that we have discovered fire.

What are we so afraid of? What is the church so afraid of? Marriage is a beautiful and wonderful thing, the commitment of two people in love seeking God's blessing. I am delighted and thrilled to be married, in fact I've spent most of my life married in one way or another. I would encourage anyone thinking about it to go for it. But the church has made a mess of how it views and conducts marriage and hurting and excluding many in the process. It needs to embrace love in all its fullness and in every expression. It must celebrate the power of love that cannot be quenched and that flourishes in all human relationships. It must embrace the beauty and joy that is to be found in the blessed variety of human relationships. It must love as God is love, and as we are all called to do.