

## **Celebration of Marriage**

### **St Bede's, Basingstoke**

**25<sup>th</sup> April 2009**

Three weeks ago, we gathered as a diocese in the Cathedral to celebrate the Mass of the Oils. It was a wonderful occasion which, as it always does, paid particular attention to the priests and deacons of the diocese, the renewal of their promises of commitment and their plea that they should be held in the prayers of their people whom they seek to serve.

I said then that you – the laity – know what richness you need to find in the ministry of your priests and deacons. You expect to be able to find in us a familiarity and intimacy with God so that, in all humility and confidence, we might be able to lead you to God. When all is said and done, the only richness you hope to find in us is the richness of God.

This is a “high” understanding of the priestly vocation and one which you rightly hold. Today, I want to put before all of you, who are celebrating significant anniversaries in your married lives, a similar “high” understanding of marriage, that sacrament which defines your lives. It is important that we do so at this time when so much in our public and political life is intent on undermining this great sacrament which underpins the whole of our Christian life.

Let's start with that reading from Colossians – and let me remind you of what Paul wrote: “As the chosen of God...you are to be clothed in heartfelt compassion, in generosity and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another; forgive each other...The Lord has forgiven you; now you must do the same. Over all these clothes, put on love, the perfect bond.” It's in these qualities, generously lived out by you over many years, that we find the sanctity of marriage, its richness for human growth and its importance, both for our immediate families and for the family of the nation.

Inevitably, you will cast your minds back to the beginnings of the partnership that you enjoy today. You will remember the quickening of the heart and those first stirrings of love. You will remember the joy of sharing and that sense of contentment that comes from being together. You will remember and rejoice in that coming together in oneness and the ideals and hopes that you have had and which you have done your best to sustain over the years. Be thankful for the great gift of love with which the Lord has blessed you.

But you will also remember the realities of your shared lives and the challenges that they have made on your generosity and love, on your need for that patience and understanding of which Paul writes. You won't have always got it right – none of us do – so you will remember too those moments when there has been need for forgiveness and mercy and understanding.

This all goes to prove that in any Christian vocation, which is a way of life, there has to be what is described as the “gradualness of the Law.” Vocation, be it to marriage or priesthood, is about a process of building and sharing lives and enthusiasms; it takes time and involves change. You did not achieve perfection on the day of your marriage. Cardinal Newman writes that “to be perfect means to have changed many times” and all of you will have learned the truth of that.

Today is an opportunity for a solemn recommitment of your lives to one another, a recommitment to that love which “costs not less than everything”. This is your fidelity to the particularity of loving to which the Lord has called you – and it costs. “Remain in that love...and love one another as I have loved you.” St John goes on to write, though we haven't heard those words today, that “no one can have greater love than to lay down their life for a friend.” That is precisely what you undertook when you first exchanged your marriage vows, however many years ago. At that moment, “the peace of Christ reigned in your hearts and it was for this that you were called into one body”. And, of course, “the peace of Christ” is another way of saying “the presence of Christ” is in your hearts and families.

This vision of your vocation may seem hopelessly idealistic but, striving to make this vision the reality of your married lives is to bear witness to the world of what St Paul describes as “the unfathomable riches of Christ.” In the Church, you are not simply married for yourselves; you are married for all of us and for all who live around us. You give us the opportunity to see and experience - made flesh in yourselves – the love that the Lord has for each of us and for all his people, You show us what it means to lay down life for friends. You are witnesses to the Gospel, so that when I want to talk about Christ's love for us, then I can point to you and say “there you are; look at that.”

You are in the front line of the mission of the Church – proclaimers and witnesses of the Gospel of love. Hear again and take heart from other words of John Paul II – “What the world needs are heralds of the Gospel, who are experts in humanity, familiar with their own emotions, able to share them with others, and who are, at the same time, contemplatives who have fallen in love with God.”

If ever there was a “high” teaching on marriage this is it; it is your vocation – we rejoice in it - and our prayer today is to help you celebrate it in prayer and gratitude to the Lord who alone gives the gift.