

Marriage Mass 2010
Basingstoke 12th June 2010

A Bishop can be described in many ways, but he is always the “chief liturgist” for his diocese. It is my job to preside over the celebration of the sacraments in the diocese and to celebrate some of them. I do plenty of confirmations, a few baptisms at the Easter Vigil, some ordinations to priesthood and diaconate and a number of anointings of the sick when celebrated by the community. But – and this is why I am so pleased to be here once again with all of you as you give thanks for significant milestones in your own personal celebrations of the Sacrament of Marriage – seldom am I able to preside at a wedding. I have many nieces and nephews and as the sort of family chaplain, I am wheeled out for their weddings but that’s about the sum total of my recent wedding experience, apart from one occasion in Dublin last December.

Last year at about this time, we gathered together as a diocesan family to celebrate significant wedding anniversaries and more than 100 couples turned up, including one couple who had been married for 75 years. It was a wonderful occasion and full of much joy, much happiness and much faith. It was genuinely a celebration of graceful success and it gave me the opportunity to put a “high” understanding of marriage before those couples who had born the heat of the day. Among other things, I said to them that their marriages had defined their lives and, because of that, and because of their fidelity to one another over many years, they were playing a very important part in the public and political life of our country, which seems so intent on undermining this great sacrament which is so fundamental to the public and prospering life of the Church and society.

Our readings today speak of the very basic qualities of our lives as Christian men and women. First of all, as St John reminds us, you are committed to a way of life. “Your love for each other must not be mere words or mere talk, but something active and genuine...God’s commandment is this that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and that we should love one another as he has commanded us”, showing that greatest of all loves by laying down our lives for one another. The fact that we can celebrate these various milestones of your marriages today shows how seriously you have taken those words of the Lord and St John and how, over the years, you have taken each other “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health” in a lifelong commitment of fidelity and trust.

Through thick and thin, in good times and bad, in joy and sacrificial suffering, you have found the holiness of your marriages precisely in the fact that you have unstintingly given yourselves to each other in selfless love. You have constantly striven to build up those right relationships which are the bedrock of a successful marriage.

You will tell me – and indeed I know this – that it's not an easy journey. Sharing your lives with each other makes deep demands on your reserves of generosity and love and of your mutual need for patience and understanding. You will also tell me, and I am sure you will tell each other, that you have not always got things right and many are the times when you will have needed to seek forgiveness and healing from each other. This flows naturally when there is a deep sense of the rightness of your communion with each other. It requires honesty and generosity. I once came across a couple who wanted to make their confession together. That was very moving for me as the priest celebrating the sacrament, but I don't think I would recommend it as a normal practice.

The Gospel reading from Matthew that we have heard today speaks powerfully of the invitation from the Lord to share your burdens with him. "Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls.

Your married life is an invitation from the Lord to enjoy your lives together and truly to "go out and bear fruit". And this brings me to another emphasis of Christian marriage which I think is vitally important. In the Church, you are not simply married for yourselves; you are married for all of us and for all who live around you. You give us all 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 – or any other preacher – want to talk about Christ's love for us, all we have to do is to point to you and say "there you are; look at that."

You are to be in the front line of the mission of the Church – proclaimers and witnesses of the Gospel of love. Hear again, and take heart, from some 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."

I know from your very presence here that, as the Gospel says "you bless the Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them" to you. You have been graced to understand the fundamental truths and values which lie at the heart of successful marriages – qualities often discounted by our cynical world. You treasure them and we join you in your prayer of blessings and thanksgiving. We rejoice with you in your marriages, their fruitfulness and in the love that has sustained them. We give thanks to God in prayer and celebration, recognising that to him alone belongs the gift that we are celebrating together in this Mass.