

SIGNIFICANT WEDDING ANNIVERSARIES

I remember once as a parish priest, preparing a wedding homily and wondering what to say. Having prayed for some time, reflecting on the Readings, I then looked on the internet. It wasn't very positive. *Love*, one website said, *is a long, sweet dream // but marriage is the alarm clock*. It went on: *Marriage is not a word: it's a sentence*. Another site had a tip for the Bridegroom: *To get married, you need three rings: the engagement ring, the wedding ring, and the suffer-ring*. And another had a tip for the Bride: *Husbands are like lawn mowers. They're hard to get started; they emit foul odours and they don't work half the time!*

But this today is not a wedding. It's our annual diocesan Mass for those celebrating a Significant Wedding Anniversary. And I'm delighted to welcome you here to St. Bede's to give thanks to God for 25, 30, 40, 50, 60+ years of marriage! Did you know, there are 77 couples here today, with between them 3,237 years' experience of marriage? A fantastic achievement: congratulations! The most popular category this year is the Golden Wedding: we have 27 couples celebrating 50 years of marriage, together with 8 celebrating 60 and one, 65 years. As your Bishop, I thank you profoundly for being married, and for still being married. I thank you for your example, fidelity and service. Like the priesthood, marriage too is a vocation, a call from God. Indeed, we can apply to you the words of Jesus in today's Gospel: *You did not choose me. No, I chose you. And I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last*. Love is a deep mystery, a Divine mystery. When as a parish priest I was preparing couples for marriage, I'd often wonder, when meeting the couple for the first time: What does he see in her? What does she see in him? People come in all different shapes and sizes. Why they are in love is a mystery; it's God's work! This is why as Catholics, we see marriage and the priesthood as two mutually enriching vocations and states of life, ministries of service that foster the vitality and growth of God's spiritual family the Church, and God's human family, the world. Today, I thank you for your response.

Last year, Pope Francis issued a major teaching document on marriage and the family, called *Amoris Laetitia*, 'The Joy of Love.' I'd really recommend it to you for prayer and study. The holy father outlines Jesus's teaching on chastity, marriage, sexuality and family life, but he does so with compassion and a real desire to reach out to those who have drifted from the faith because they find themselves in all sorts of irregular situations. *Amoris Laetitia* addresses four matters: how to promote the vocation of marriage among the young today; how to prepare engaged couples; how to support married couples and their families; how to help the divorced and civilly remarried. This is why in the Diocese we now have a Marriage and Family Life worker to sponsor projects supporting marriage: please pray for all couples and families.

*You are God's chosen race, his saints; he loves you* says St. Paul, full of advice, in that 1stR. In this festal Mass today, let's truly give thanks to God for His great love, for the mystery of His choice, for the call to marriage and for the grace, amidst the difficulties, to persevere. Indeed, let's turn to the Holy Family of Nazareth, asking the prayers of Mary and Joseph for ourselves and for our families. May the Lord Jesus bless you today with all the graces you need to go forward into the next, many happy and holy years of marriage.