

Sermon on Marriage....

Terry and Susan have just stepped bravely forward and renewed their marriage vows. It is not strictly necessary, of course, to do this sort of thing in public. A marriage should be new every morning and no getting out of the wrong side of the bed. In marriage there is no wrong side of the bed.

What this couple have done here today is in some ways more satisfying and appealing than the usual wedding. Because their renewed vows are not a triumph of hope over experience: the renewal of them has been made in the light of their experience as a married couple. It has been made by two Christian people in the middle of the most sacred service performed by the church. They have done this not as an act of public advertisement, but properly as a thanksgiving for their lives together; as a prayer for God's continued help; and by going public, as it were, they are asking for our prayers too.

Why do I say that what we have this morning is more satisfying than the usual wedding? What's wrong with weddings, then? Nothing's wrong with them. Nothing at all. Except – I think you would find if you asked most priests – Holy Matrimony is the service they have the most difficulty with. And this is the chief difficulty: it doesn't matter how many times I say it, but most people who turn up for a church wedding don't think it has anything to do with the body, with the flesh, sex...

So what do they think? If the truth be known, they're rather coy about it all. They know that a man and his wife is about sex, but they see the church service as the faintly embarrassing, quaint and probably boring bit they've decided to go through first. It's for the photos, and for the reception which is going to cost twenty times what the church costs – thus perhaps betraying a certain order of priorities. This is probably the priest's fault - my fault – for not teaching the Christian meaning of marriage properly. But I do my best...

I mean, we use the real marriage service and not the sentimental euphemistic tripe of the new service. If the couple and the congregation will actually listen to what the marriage service says, they will hear this:

Marriage is not to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding.

In other words, you see, the Prayer Book knows that men *do* have carnal lusts and appetites. And when it says *men* it doesn't just mean the man who stands there in black; it means the woman in white. *Man* means humankind, male and female – or at least it did before the phoney and gutless egalitarianism of the age turned *sex* into *gender*. The Bible and the Prayer Book have no illusions about what human beings get up to. All the best dirty jokes are in the Old Testament. In order to be spiritually useful, prayer books have to be psychologically accurate, don't they? And *The Book of Common Prayer* has us all bang to rights.

It tells us matrimony *was ordained for the procreation of children*. Men and women can of course manage that bit without benefit of clergy; but the service adds a

purpose: that these children *be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord and to the praise of his holy Name*. This reminds the couple of their duty to their offspring – which is to look after them and put the fear of God in them. It's a long way from Dr Spock. It's a long way from letting them eat what they like, sleep where they like and believe what they like.

And then they will hear that marriage *was ordained for a remedy against sin and to avoid fornication*. Not that they may know each other *in delight and tenderness or be tender with each other's dreams*. You won't find any colour supplement *spirituality* at St Michael's. Because the Prayer Book marriage service understands human nature, it is able to tell us how our human nature is redeemed.

It hardly seems to matter how often the priest says these things. Half-dressed young ladies with goose pimples and funny hats still turn up and giggle sheepishly at weddings and imagine that the church thinks sex is dirty. So I suppose most people think the wedding service is a bit of spiritual gloss, an ornament – as some think that the christening service is just a legitimating prelude to the booze up and the cake. But it isn't. And the priest must keep repeating till he's blue in the face that the Christian faith is about the body. It is about the creation of this body out of dust. It is about the Incarnation of God in human flesh. It is about the procreation of the generations until doomsday. It is about the Sacrament of the Body and Blood. It is about the Resurrection of the Body.

The single biggest threat to the Christian faith in all history is the denial of the body. That heresy appears in Manicheism – and St Augustine spent his life arguing it down. It occurs again with the Albigensian disease. It recurred at the Enlightenment with the misplaced trust in *pure reason*. It besets us now in the 21st century in all these foolish notions of progress, human perfectibility and the denial of our sinful nature. But if we persist in denying our nature we shall always be victims of our nature, unredeemed.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was made flesh. We proclaim not the immortality of the soul but the resurrection of the body. The supreme reality here on earth is the Sacrament of the Lord's Body. If you remember nothing else about the Christian faith, remember that it is rooted in the body.

The Prayer Book marriage service is full of things, bodies, parts and passions – *this ring, sickness and health, all my worldly goods*. It has the bridegroom say to his bride *With my body I thee worship*. Tell that to the Manichees! Tell it to the new Manichean heretics who have compiled a marriage service that leaves out carnal lusts and appetites, that daren't mention sex.

The modern world desires to misunderstand the Christian faith, because it is afraid of facing its truth. And the most pathetic sort of atheist is the one who says *The Christian teaching on marriage is not true – but marriage is a good basis for society*. In other words, *let us base our society on a lie*. And that is the root of all the perfumed atheism in the world: it is a lie and it comes from the father of lies.

Chesterton says *There are people who wish Christianity to remain as a spirit. They mean, very literally, that they wish it to remain as a ghost. But it is not going to remain as a ghost.*

The most wonderful endorsement of marriage comes in St John's Gospel in the glorious story of the marriage at Cana which Our Lord *adorned and beautified with his presence*. And the water into wine. With this in mind, Chesterton comments: *Again and again before our time men have grown content with a diluted doctrine. And again and again there has followed on that dilution, coming as out of the darkness in a crimson cataract, the strength of the original red wine.*

So, in the full confidence of our faith, we pray for Terry and Susan and for all those being married in St Michael's this year:

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost, bless, preserve and keep you; the Lord mercifully with his favour look upon you; and so fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace that ye may so live together in this life, that in the world to come ye may have life everlasting. Amen.