

This afternoon, here in Spanish Point, we are celebrating the marriage of Niamh and George. Here in this Church you are making a very public declaration before your family and friends, before God of a commitment to one another that you have already found in your shared life together. This commitment has grown out of the love you have discovered in one another. Today, your friends and your family come to share with you in celebrating that love and joy you have found in each other and to ask God's richest blessing upon you in the days that lie ahead. The Bible readings you have chosen for the service today and the words of the Marriage Service itself are full of themes of commitment, of faithfulness, of the love that you have found for each other.

A day such as this is a day of looking back and looking forward. As I often remark your relationship did not happen out of the blue. On this day I invite you to think back to how it all began. The time you first noticed each other, the process in which friendship grew into love and you realised that you wanted to spend the rest of your lives with each other.

The preface that I read at the beginning of the marriage service gives us some insight into the particular Christian dimension of that commitment that you are making to each other today:

'It is God's purpose that, as husband and wife give themselves to each other in love through their lives, they shall be united in that love as Christ is united with his Church.' That bond of love between Christ and his Church finds its ultimate expression in his self giving, self forgetting, self emptying, sacrificial love. Our love for each other must show something of that same self forgetting

love of Christ himself in which the needs of the other are placed above our own. In the context of this ceremony the mutual taking of hands represents your openness and commitment towards one another.

A great deal of thought and preparation has gone into this day. The very decision to have the service here in Church, the shape and structure of the service, the choice of readings, the choice of music - and of course you have thought about what you are going to wear.

Clothes are very personal - they say a lot about how we see ourselves, about how we want other people to see us - they express something of our nature, our personality. A reserved person, for example, is unlikely to appear in bright colours.

St Paul, in writing to the Colossians, talks of clothes that suit their new found faith in Christ; and so he talks of our spiritual clothing as he tells us to "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience forgiving each other just as the Lord forgave you." Then he says, "Clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony"
(Col 3)

St Paul has a reputation for being rather severe and austere. He actually gives a lot of thought in his letters to the meaning of Christian love. I often set this teaching from his letter to the Colossians alongside the passage we have read from his first letter to the Corinthians.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." (1 Cor 13:4-7)

There will be those times when as husband and wife we will disappoint each other, maybe hurt each other. A strong marriage is one that learns to deal with difficulty and disappointment, learns to deal with failure. That does not mean that disappointment and failure do not matter - they do. They are dealt with in the context of Christian love, in which both bring something of that self giving, self forgetting love that Christ has shown for us.

Your choice of the clothes you have chosen to wear on this your wedding day will have reflected something of who you are, who you are as a couple and the marriage bond you have entered into today. May the love you have found in and for each other continue to grow; may it reflect something of that Christ centred love that Paul was talking about. May that love enfold you in the days and weeks and months and years to come as together you continue to share each others' joys, understand each others' shortcomings, forgive each others' failings, sustain each other in all that lies ahead for you both. May you both find in your marriage and in each other true peace and happiness in your life together before God.