

One of the privileges in my job is being with people at crucial stages in their lives. One that I have always enjoyed is being with a couple as they prepare for their wedding. A marriage is a huge step in anyone's life, in the life of any family. Of course in this day and age a veritable industry has grown up around it. Gone are the days of the black and white photo, the honeymoon in Galway. Hotels hold wedding fairs in which the prospective couples are invited to consider all the options that are available from the photographer, the video man, the cars, the flower consultant, the stationary, the reception and a host of options that are available for hen do's, stag do's, honeymoons in the Andes or whatever. Of course you can get married now in all sorts of venues, hotels, Croke Park, the Aviva, quite apart from the Registry Office. But a significant number are still wanting to get married in Church – and that gives us the opportunity to reflect on the marriage, the joining together of man and woman that lies behind it all.

And so the couple will come to the Rectory and we will reflect together on the nature of Christian Marriage and how they want to celebrate their marriage. The Church of Ireland Marriage Service provides a lovely framework for this process. Our mind will turn to what are to be the hymns and other music, what are to be the lessons that are going to be read. It is lovely when couples really engage with that process.

The lesson appointed this morning from Paul's letter to the Colossians is one that a couple will often choose for their marriage service. It is one that goes right to the heart of the relationship when the honeymoon is over, everyone is back to work, the sink is full, the cap is off the toothpaste – you're tired and you're stressed – and you are still in love with this irritating, selfish, amazingly loveable creature with whom you share your life. And so as I read this passage, and thought of marriages I had conducted I got out the Marriage Service in the Prayer Book and looked at some of the prayers used in that

service. There is a prayer for the couple as they embark upon their life together:

May their life together be a witness to your love in this troubled world;  
may unity overcome division, forgiveness heal injury, and joy triumph over sorrow,  
Lord, in your mercy  
**hear our prayer.**

There is also a lovely prayer that the couple may say together at the end of the service, a prayer for each other, affirming each other:

God of tenderness and strength,  
you have brought our paths together  
and led us to this day;  
go with us now as we travel through good times,  
through trouble or through change.  
Bless our home, our partings and our meetings.  
Make us worthy of each other's best,  
and tender with each other's dreams,  
trusting in your love in Jesus Christ. Amen.

These words speak of understanding, of forbearance, of love, of charity towards each other. It is with these thoughts in mind, that I want to turn to this passage from Colossians.

Bear with each other, forgive each other ..... During this last week, we were thinking about this business of forgiveness in the Confirmation group. We realised that forgiveness is not an easy option – it is difficult, it is sometimes painful, it won't always be responded to.

Of course there is a lot to the attitude to bring to our bearing with another person, forgiving another person. As the wounded party, are we sometimes a bit superior? This is where it is sometimes good to slow down our reading of some of these passages, to get behind some of the nuances in the language Paul was using. The word that Paul uses, that we have translated as 'bear with' has

connotations of patience. When he speaks of forgiveness he uses a word *carizovmenoi*, which has the same root as a word we translate as ‘grace’; he is telling his readers to forgive freely, forgive generously, graciously. So there is to be a patience and a generosity, a graciousness in our attitude to the one who has wronged us. Just as we begin to say ‘that’s all very well but.....’, Paul continues ‘just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.’ As we move from Ash Wednesday towards Good Friday our thoughts move towards Jesus’ journey to the Cross, that supreme expression of God’s love, freely and generously expressed in his seemingly futile death upon the Cross. In that death and resurrection we find our hope and our life.

We are to be channels in our own lives of that freely given, generous forgiveness that Christ has lavished upon us. That is not easy, we know it is not easy, God knows it is not easy – that is why Jesus taught us pray, ‘Forgive us our sins, our trespasses as we forgive so who sin against us.’ But there is real healing in reconciliation – and we recognise that as we pray for a couple on their wedding day

May their life together be a witness to your love in this troubled world;  
may unity overcome division, forgiveness heal injury,

To stay with this subject of marriage and family life; I recall when I was in Finglas, several houses I visited would have had a plaque on the wall with the inscription:

Christ is the Head of this house; the Unseen Guest at every meal; the  
Silent Listener to every conversation.

I recall at the time that this encapsulated very well the idea of Christ being part of everyday life in these households. The Christ who was worshipped on Sunday in St Canice’s present at every meal, party to every conversation, having authority in the life of the home..

So Paul will tell his readers to let the ‘word of Christ dwell in you richly’. “Dwell in you”. One who inhabits, who is at home, who has a place as opposed to an occasional visitor who might call, or be invited for a special occasion. He is in us and with us as we make our decisions in the home, in business, in our leisure, in our politics.

On this Mothering Sunday, our thoughts turn very naturally to family life and the mothers that lie at the heart of it. Coming as it does, half way through Lent, as our thoughts turn towards Jerusalem, we recall that self forgetting, self emptying love that must lie at the heart of family life, of Christian life. As we pray for the newly married, so we pray for ourselves:

May their life together be a witness to your love in this troubled world;  
may unity overcome division, forgiveness heal injury,

Christ be beside me,  
Christ be before me,  
Christ be behind me,  
    King of my heart.  
Christ be within me,  
Christ be below me,  
Christ be above me,  
    never to part.

*Hymn 611*