

One of the joys of someone in my position is being with a couple as they prepare for their wedding day. As part of that preparation, I go through the marriage service in some detail. We come to that part when I turn to the congregation and say:

I am required by law to ask anyone present who knows a reason why ...
. and may not lawfully marry to declare it now.

I generally say something like ‘that is their last chance to put a spoke in it.’ There is generally some light hearted banter about what would happen if someone did put up an objection.

Then we come to the point where I say to the couple themselves:

The vows you are about to take
are to be made in the name of God,
who is judge of all
and knows all the secrets of our hearts;
therefore if either of you knows any reason
why you may not lawfully marry
you must declare it now.

I read it out and then generally say, ‘That is your last chance – after that you are in it for life.’ It is said with a smile but with total seriousness because it is a life time commitment:

to have and to hold
from this day forward,
for better, for worse,
for richer, for poorer,
in sickness, and in health,
to love and to cherish
till death us do part,
according to God’s holy law.
This is my solemn vow.

This all came to mind as I read the lesson appointed to be read today from the Letter to the Hebrews:

“Never will I leave you;

never will I forsake you.”

It speaks of God's abiding faithfulness to this world he has created, this humanity he has redeemed. Over and over again in the scriptures the bond between God and his people Israel, Christ and the Church is expressed in terms of the marriage bond. This symbol of marriage brings together love, faithfulness, forgiveness, intimacy, communication, understanding, shared space, respect. It is about being with and for one another in a shared journey of a lifetime. At the heart of the marriage ceremony are the promises. These promises are made not to constrain or limit one another but to set the parameters of a common life within which the couple grow, within which they share the joys, the challenges, the blessings, the sorrows of their common life.

Of course it is to the community that this is addressed. And so in the analogy of marriage, the contract, the covenant is not between God and the individual but between God and the community. That gives us a special bond, a special affinity, a solidarity with one another that goes right to the heart of our understanding of who we are before God.

As a community we meet Sunday by Sunday for worship. We come to meet with God in word and sacrament, to praise, to come with our regrets, our hopes, our fears for ourselves and for one another. We come also to meet with one another, to encourage and be encouraged by one another. We come to share in times of celebration and commitment in baptism, in confirmation, in marriage. We come to support one another in times of loss and sadness. Then there are those one to one encounters before and after the service, over coffee, the walk to the car; the simple presence one with another in which we realise that we are not alone, in which we experience in and through one another God's presence, find something of God's strength and God's peace.

I have spoken of our solidarity one with another in God. It is in this Spirit that we welcome Linda Frost, or should I say another Linda Frost into our midst. Linda is embarking upon her final year of training for the ordained ministry of the Church of Ireland. She will be with us each Sunday and will engage in pastoral work during the week. She will also be expected to complete a dissertation, attend teaching blocks in the Theological Institute and also attend to her family in Roscommon – it will be a busy and demanding year. She brings to us her own particular gifts and experiences in life and in the Church and we look forward to your ministry among us. We have our opportunity to minister to Linda in the encouragement we offer in this crucial year at the start of this latest stage in her Christian service. She comes to us as a Lay Reader but on Sunday 22nd, at 3:30 in the afternoon, she will be ordained Deacon in Christchurch Cathedral. One very tangible encouragement we can offer would be for as many of us as possible to attend that service in Christchurch. I am confident that when she appears at your door she will receive the warmest of Howth welcomes.

Looking back on my own Deacon's year, I recall with great gratitude and affection the support and encouragement not only of my Rector, the late Cecil Wilson but also the support and encouragement of the members of the Parish of Raheny and Coolock. Linda, may you look back on this year in the Parish of Howth with similar affection. May God bless you in your ministry among us.