

Celebrating Weddings at St John's Boldre 7 July 2019

On midsummer's day, nine years ago, in a Wiltshire churchyard, sitting on a bench eating sandwiches, closely observed by a voyeuristic robin, I took one hell of a risk, one hell of a risk. I popped the question to Diana, but in so circumlocutory and round about way, I had to repeat it less wordily, for her to get the point. Whereupon she, too, took one hell of a risk, one hell of a risk, and said 'Yes'.

Far, far safer to remain uncommitted. To live together unobligated, free to move on, colours folded in the cupboard, not nailed to the mast, partnered not spoused, paramoured not maritally moored, foot-loose not marriage hobbled, fancy-free not marriage nobbled, options open, able to play the field forever.

Far, far easier, safer, cowardly and dull, dull, dull, dull.

The Old Testament reading today told of Jacob's wedding. He thought he was marrying beautiful Rachel, but was tricked. When he woke up next day, after the marriage, it was her ugly older sister Leah he was in bed with and married to.

From that story I get my very favourite wedding aphorism, namely:

*Every man marries Rachel,
only to wake up and find he's married Leah,*

To avoid being sexist, I always balance that with a concocted Shakespearean aphorism, namely:

*Every woman marries Romeo,
only to wake up and find she's married,
big-bellied, belching, burping, coarse Falstaff.*

Poor Diana, poor me. Poor all of us who are married. We only find out who we've really married, long after the wedding. When life has bashed us about the ears, disappointments have been swallowed children have tried and frazzed the nerves and taken away all our freedom and privacy. When hopes haven't materialized, ambitions not been realised, when familiarity has worn away all gloss, all pretence, and our physical beauty has blurred and blubbered us up, or wrinkled and withered us down.

Marriage is a long voyage of discovery, and the real person we slowly discover is often not altogether to our liking.

Therein lies the risk, the danger, the madness of marriage. At its very heart, is a vow that defies common-sense, is over the top, outrageous, crazy. It promises permanency, forever-and-everness. No matter how much we change or who we become it's all the way, all the way, till death parts us.

Sometimes, inevitably, it doesn't work, can't work. Marriages do fail.

But in spite of that, we all, when truly in love, want and need to take the risky vow of permanency. For we love all and everything that our beloved is; the whole person from beginning to end. We take a punt on all of our loved one's history. The continuum, past, present and future. Authentic love is not a flash in the pan, it's a living, lasting, maturing, deepening wonder and grace. Shakespeare the sonneteer gets it right
Love

*...is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,*

On the contrary, it welcomes and accommodates itself to change. It transforms, transfigures, enchants and more importantly helps define and refine change, maturing and ageing.

Granting us the grace to see the time-weathered spouse who, down through the years, has done so much alongside us, beside us, with us and for us as profoundly and uniquely beautiful, enabling us say with Shakespeare's contemporary, John Donne:

*No spring nor summer beauty hath such grace
As I have seen in one autumnal face.*

And to say, along with Robert Browning:

*Grow old along with me,
The best is yet to be.....*

And even if our marriage fails, falls apart, and we are betrayed, abandoned, beached, shelved, the risk was worth taking, had to be taken, *je ne regrette rien!*

So the best thing about getting married at St John's is not the beauty of the building, lovely though it is. Nor is it the loveliness of its New Forest setting, perfect though it is. Nor is it the quality of the music and flowers, first class though they most undoubtedly are. Nor is it the wit and wisdom of the vicar, dubious, close to the wind and wild, as too often that can be.

No. The best thing about getting married at St John's is that here you get a Christian wedding, a Christian marriage. That is, one that most emphatically is for keeps, until death, built, as it is, on an understanding and interpretation of love that is profoundly and richly selfless. Growing out of God's sacrificing, selfless love revealed in the Jesus of Nazareth story.

There is a selfish side too, though, to welcoming and encouraging weddings at St John's. This poor old Vicar actually thrives upon and needs their joy and fun to counter-balance all those funerals.

Though paradoxically, the relationship between weddings and funerals is more symbiotic than counter-balancing. Because dealing so much and so often, with the aged, the dying and the bereaved very often enhances and reinforces one's belief in and appreciation of marriage.

Three days ago I visited Colin and Joy Erne. I do so every month, with Holy Communion. They were married in St John's on the 14th of April, 1951. The bride arrived by taxi. Hailstorms the day before. The day itself lovely, perfect.

They remember fondly all the details: the hymns, the flowers, the guests, the weather, but not the name of the visiting vicar who did the deed. Put that in your pipe and smoke it Andrew.

The reception was in *The Anchor and Hope* pub in Lymington High Street, now closed. After the reception they were taken to Brockenhurst station in a Jaguar sporting a large sign: *Honeymoon Express*.

They'd hoped to honeymoon in Switzerland, Colin's father being Swiss, but couldn't afford it. London it had to be, in the *Strand Palace Hotel*. They went to so many shows and saw so many sights they spent far more money than they would have had they gone to Switzerland.

Colin is 90 in a couple of week's time and almost immobilised by strokes and old age. Yet how life enhancing I find my visits. He and Joy are my best source of news about St John's, Boldre and Lymington during the past seventy or eighty years, all recalled with wit and gentle good humour. Colin served for years on our PCC and as a boy sang in the choir.

Sixty eight years married, they've weathered terrible tragedy, marital tiffs and joys innumerable. Colin actually walked out on Joy once, he says. For about an hour and a half. They've had only one argument though, which, he says, is still going on.

I love them to bits. Not only for who they are, but for demonstrating as well just how worthwhile the mad marriage risk is, and how grateful I should be, that on a Wiltshire churchyard bench, Diana, recklessly said 'yes', to circumlocutory me.

(Canon Andrew Neaum 7 July 2019)