

be. wherever the wound appears in our souls, that is precisely the place from which we will give our major gift to the community”.

Midlife is an experience of our wounded-ness. We serve a God who heals through wounds. May that include ours?

Suggestions for further reading: Janice Brewi & Anne Brennan, *Celebrate Mid-life* (Crossroad 1998); Gerald O’Collins, *The Second Journey* (Paulist 1987); and Mike Riddell, *The Sacred Journey*, (Lion 2001).

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## TIMOTHY AND CHARLOTTE

### Paul Beasley-Murray

*This article is a transcript of the sermon preached by the author at the wedding of his son and daughter-in-law.*

When you announced that you were going to get married in this church, I was both pleased and intrigued. I was pleased you wanted to be married in church, but intrigued you had chosen this particular church, for St Dunstan’s and All Saints, the parish church of Stepney, is one of the ‘Oranges and Lemons’ churches.

‘Oranges and Lemons’ is an English nursery rhyme which young children love to sing:

‘Oranges and Lemons’, say the Bells of St Clement’s.  
‘You owe me five farthings’, say the Bells of St Martin’s.  
‘When will you pay me?’ say the Bells of Old Bailey.  
‘When I grow rich’, say the Bells of Shoreditch.  
‘When will that be?’ say the Bells of Stepney.  
‘I do not know’, say the Great Bells of Bow.  
‘Here comes a candle to light you to bed  
Here comes a chopper to chop off your head  
Chip chop chip chop - the last man’s dead’.

The origin of this nursery rhyme is found in some of the rituals surrounding the execution of prisoners in the early 18th century. A candle would be lit outside the condemned man’s cell, the ‘Bells of

Old Bailey' would peel, and subsequently all the other bells, including the 'Bells of Stepney' would join in. Hence the final three lines of the nursery rhyme. What a start to a marriage! You have chosen to get married in one of these churches. What's more, you have asked for the bells to be pealed immediately following the service. What message will those bells be conveying?

The twentieth century Russian anarchist, Emma Goldman, would have been quite clear. These bells, she would have said, announce the death knell of your love for one another. "Marriage and love have nothing in common; they are as far apart as the poles; they are, in fact, antagonistic to one another. Dante's motto over *Inferno* applies with equal force to marriage: 'Ye who enter here leave all hope behind'."

Thank God, Emma Goldman and her followers are in the minority. The bells will be celebrating not the death of your love, but the fulfilment of your love in marriage.

In the words of a song by Cahn and van Heusen, popularized by Frank Sinatra:

“Love and marriage, love and marriage  
It's an institute you can't disparage  
Ask the local gentry  
And they will say it's elementary  
  
Try, try to separate them  
It's an illusion  
Try, try, try and you will only come  
To this conclusion  
  
Love and marriage, love and marriage  
Go together like a horse and carriage”

I'll spare you from the rest of the doggerel. However, you've got the point. Love and marriage do indeed go together like a horse and carriage. That's why we are all here today.

So let me reflect on your love and marriage. At the moment I guess you are both starry-eyed. You both think you're the cat's whiskers, and with good reason. Charlotte probably thinks Timothy is the most wonderful man in the world; and certainly Timothy can't imagine a more adorable woman than Charlotte! Alas, the time will come when this dream will be over. 'Love', it has been said, 'is a temporary insanity, curable by marriage' (Ambrose Bierce). 'Love

is the delightful interval between meeting a beautiful girl and discovering that she looks like a haddock' (John Barrymore). Yes, at some stage the bubble will burst and you will discover that neither of you is the ultimate in perfection. Then what? I believe that the secret of any lasting marriage is a four-letter word called love - the love of which the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Cor 13: "Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs.... Love never gives up; and its faith, hope and patience never fail."

Paul wrote these words to a church where relationships were far from right, where there were some very real disagreements. But these words are also applicable to marriage, for love is the key to all successful relationships. What is this love of which Paul speaks? Hollywood equates love with sex. Mills and Boon equates it with romantic slush. The confectionery industry equates it with giving him your last Rolo.

The love of which Paul speaks is an unusually special kind of love. The Greek language has a number of words for love. There was *eros*-love, i.e. erotic/sexual love; but that is not the word Paul uses here. There was *philia*-love, the love good friends have for one another; but that is not the word Paul uses here. There was *storge*-love, affectionate love which parents have for their children; but that too is not the word Paul uses here. No, Paul speaks here of *agape*-love. *Agape* is a word unknown in classical Greek. It is a word which the first Christians picked up and used to speak of the kind of love which Jesus has for us.

In 1 Cor13, Paul makes a host of statements about *agape*-love. I want to highlight just three:

### **1. Love is about giving**

It is about putting the other person first. In the words of Paul: "Love is not jealous or conceited or proud - love is not selfish" (vv.4,5). Zsa-Zsa Gabor said: "Husbands are like fires. They go out when unattended". Leonard Bernstein, the great American composer and conductor, was once asked what was the hardest instrument to play. Without hesitation he replied: "Second fiddle. I can always get plenty of first violins, but to find one who plays second fiddle with as much enthusiasm, or second French horn, or

second flute, now that's a problem. And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony."

Love is putting the other first - love is not self-seeking, love is self-giving. All this we see in Jesus who, in giving himself for us, put us first. He put our interests first.

## **2. Love is forgiving the other**

"Love does not keep a record of wrongs" (v.5). Woody Allen's marriage might have lasted had he learned to forgive. As it was he said of his wife: "She was so immature. She kept sinking the boats in my bath". Saying sorry and forgiving each other is something we all need to learn.

Ogden Nash had some wise advice for husbands:

"To keep your marriage brimming  
with love in the marriage cup,  
whenever you're wrong, admit it;  
whenever you're right. shut up!"

## **3. Love is always giving**

If your love is to be like that of Jesus, then there is to be no end to your love. In the words of Paul: "Love never gives up" (v.7a). It is often been said that 1 Cor 13 is a description of the person of Jesus. Jesus never gave up on anybody. He never gave up on Peter - indeed, I don't believe he ever gave up on Judas Iscariot. And what was true of them, is true too of us. He loved us to the end, even to dying for us on a Cross. In a way which is true of nobody else, Jesus gave of himself to others, and in giving of himself, he forgave even the worst of hurts against him.

Needless to say, if you are to learn to love one another with the love of Jesus, then you need to put Jesus at the centre of your marriage: only then can you put each other first; only then can you forgive each other; only then can you keep on loving.

Timothy and Charlotte, I believe that by getting married in church today, you recognize your need to have God's blessing on your life together. But to know his blessing, it is not simply enough to have a church wedding. In the days and years that lie ahead, you must learn to put Jesus first and to show the kind of love that Jesus has shown to us all. May God help you to do that, and so

may God bless you both, and may your marriage be a blessing not only to one another, but also to all those who enter your home.

## GOSPEL-HARDENED CONGREGATIONS

### Hedgehog

Invitations keep arriving to attend re-unions - strange events, where you meet with people you last saw maybe 40 or 50 years ago. One was to the college where I trained for ministry, in the company of bright-eyed fervent well-thatched enthusiasts, pawing the ground as we prepared to change the world. We were going to march into the doldrums of our churches and yank them back to life. The main theme of ministry was challenge. "Come on," we would urge, "get more involved, do more, give more. try harder. Then the church will revive and the Kingdom will come." We did all this, and guess what: nothing changed.

The re-union invitation contained a recent picture of some of these old-time zealots. Two were in wheelchairs, all were bald and showing signs of crumbling. "I cannot go to this; look how they've changed", I said to my wife. She smiled. "Look in the mirror, dear," she urged.

Notwithstanding the way we have all changed in physical presence, the most telling change has been in our gospel emphasis. My father was in ministry for 35 years and said at the end that he wished he had spoken more about the comfort than the challenge of faith. Only now do I begin to understand what he meant. Have we been challenged into paralysis and decline? In a previous career as a news reporter I recall sitting in court and hearing a felon described as being impervious to all warnings and advice. On one ear lobe was tattooed 'in' and on the other 'out'.

It happens. After a while the most oft-repeated warning, pleading, urging loses force. Congregations become gospel-hardened. In 20 years at my last church, I preached 1,400 sermons, many of which had to do with strategies for growth and the need to build up the Kingdom. Membership at the start of the ministry was 110. At the end it was 106!