

Baptist churches) but that self-examination will be healthy. It will mean that we call on outsiders for help, and hope to foster relations with other churches who want to do the same. But all of this surely spells good news for the Kingdom.

As the numbers in the churches decline, we so often gaily hum the tune “things can only get better”, instead of admitting a serious problem exists. Alternatively we panic and conclude that everything must be reinvented. Do you have non-negotiables within your own persuasion and denomination, and do they all still work or do they need re-examination? If so, perhaps it is time to take a fresh perspective on some things without abandoning everything. By all means, “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”, but if it is broke,,,

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A SERVICE FOR THE RENEWAL OF WEDDING VOWS

Paul Beasley-Murray

Wedding music

Welcome

On the occasion of the centenary of our church's life, I warmly welcome you all to this service of renewal of marriage vows. In the first place I welcome those of you who were married here in this church, but I also welcome the many other couples, who were married elsewhere, and who have come to join in this special service too.

HYMN: For all the love that from the earliest days

The Declaration of Purpose:

We have come together in the presence of God to renew our marriage vows. In this service we will give thanks to God for all the good things we have experienced in our life together; we will ask his forgiveness for where we have failed him and one another; and in turn we will recommit ourselves to one another for so long as life shall last.

However, before we do so let us first let us remind ourselves of God's purpose for marriage.

The Scriptures teach us that marriage is a gift of God. It is God's purpose that, as husband and wife give themselves to each other in love throughout their lives, they shall be united in that love as Christ is united with his church.

Marriage is given, that husband and wife may comfort and help each other, living faithfully together in need and in plenty, in sorrow and in joy. It is given, that with delight and tenderness they may know each other in love, and, through the joy of their bodily union, may strengthen the union of their hearts and lives. It is given, that they may have children and be blessed in caring for them and bringing them up in accordance with God's will, to his praise and glory.

This is the way of life, created and hallowed by God, which we as married couples have come to reaffirm.

The Scriptures

As we come to reaffirm our marriage vows, let us hear the Word of God.

Jesus said: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my own joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you" (John 15.9-12).

The Apostle Paul wrote: "Love is patient; love is kind and envies no one. Love is never boastful, nor conceited, nor rude; never selfish, not quick to take offence. Love keeps no score of wrongs; does not gloat over other people's sins, but delights in the truth. There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope and its endurance" (1 Cor 13.4-7).

Prayers of confession and thanksgiving

Our Father God, confronted with your Word we confess our sin against you and against one another. We have not always loved as you would have us love. Forgive us for the times when we have hurt one another; when we have shown lack of respect and lack of understanding for one another; when we have fought with one

another rather than prayed for one another. Forgive us for the many ways in which we have spoiled that perfect relationship you planned for us together.

And yet, as we come to renew our marriage vows, we are mindful not simply of our failings and mistakes. We are also very conscious of the many good things we have experienced in our life together. Lord, we thank you for all the fun and laughter we have known, for those quieter moments of deepening companionship, as also for the secret intimacies of our lovemaking. We thank you for all that we have had in common, and also for those differing interests and differing insights which have broadened our life together. We thank you for the homes that we have been able to make, and for the children with which many of us have been blessed. We thank you for all the good times we have been through together - and for all that we have learnt together in the bad times too. We thank you for friends who have enriched our lives, as also for friends who have stood by us in difficult days. Above all we thank you for the difference you have made to our lives - giving us purpose and direction, helping us to cope when life has been tough, and deepening our joy when life has been good. For all these gifts of your grace, we thank you.

Renewal of vows (all stand)

As on your wedding day you held hands together as a sign of your love for one another, so I would ask you to stand and hold hands as Caroline and I now lead you through the renewal of our marriage vows.

Paul: I call upon the husbands here to reaffirm their marriage vows:

Husbands: In the presence of God I renew my commitment to you, my wife. All that I am I give to you and all that I have I share with you. Whatever the future holds, I will love you and stand by you, as long as we both shall live.

Caroline: I call upon the wives here to reaffirm their marriage vows:

Wives: In the presence of God I renew my commitment to you, my husband. All that I am I give to you and all that I have I share with you. Whatever the future holds, I will love you and stand by you, as long as we both shall live.

The Aaronic Blessing

May the Lord bless you and take care of you; may the Lord be kind and gracious to you; may the Lord look on you with favour and give you peace.

HYMN: Love divine, all loves excelling

Readings

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “Marriage is more than your love for each other. It has a higher power, for it is God’s holy ordinance, through which he wills to perpetuate the human race until the end of time. In your love you see only your two selves in the world, but in marriage you are a link in the chain of the generations which God causes to come and pass away to his glory, and calls into his kingdom. In your love you see only the heaven of your own happiness, but in marriage you are placed at a post of responsibility toward the world and mankind. Your love is your own private possession, but marriage is more than something personal - it is a status, an office. Just as it is the crown, and not merely the will to rule, that makes the king, so it is marriage, and not merely your love for each other, that joins you together in the sight of God and man... so love comes from you, but marriage from above, from God. As high as God is above man, so high are the sanctity, the rights, and the promise of your love. It is not your love that sustains the marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love” (Excerpt from a wedding sermon, written May 1943 from prison).

Rabbi B.R. Brickner: “Success in marriage is more than finding the right person; it is a matter of being the right person”

Howard and Charlotte Clinebell: “One of the essential functions of a good marriage is for the partners to provide encouragement and support to each other as they go through anxiety-producing periods of crisis - pregnancy, illness, children growing up and leaving home, deaths of parents...retirement. Couples who are able to support each other and to learn new ways of coping during such periods of stress achieve increased depth as a result of weathering the storms together. The bond which unites a couples that has had a mutually giving relationship for twenty, thirty, forty or more years, has something of the same power and intensity as that which unites soldiers who have come through battlefield experiences together,”

Rowland Croucher: "Conflict arises because we bring different biographies, needs, interests, values, and lifestyles to our marriage. The trigger for a 'conflictual explosion' may include loss of a job, arrival of a new baby, illness, moving to a new house, or taking an aged parent into the home. Marriage breakdowns do not happen because of 'differences'; they happen because a couple can't handle these differences. Relationships do not cause conflict; they bring out whatever incompleteness we have within us anyway. Conflict is a contest of wills, but it ought not to be viewed as a power struggle or a question of who is right or wrong. Gentle assertiveness is called for: 'speaking the truth in love' and asking about feelings that underlie the difficulty. Discuss with dignity and sensitivity to the other's need."

Paul Frost: "A successful marriage demands a divorce; a divorce from your own self-love"

Romano Guardini: "Marriage is not only the fulfilment of the immediate love that brings a man and woman together, it is also the slow transfiguration of that love through the experiences of a common reality. Early love does not yet see this reality, for the pull of the heart and senses bewitches it. Only gradually does reality establish itself, when eyes have been opened to the shortcoming and failures revealed by everyday life. He who can accept the other then, as he really is, in spite of all disappointments, who can share the joys and plagues of daily life with him just as he has shared the great experience of early love, who can walk with him before God and with God's strength, will achieve second love, the real mystery of marriage. This is as far superior to first love as the mature person is to the adult, as the self-conquering heart is to that which simply allows itself to be conquered. At the cost of much sacrifice and effort something great has come into being. Strength, profound loyalty and a stout heart are necessary to avoid the illusions of passion, cowardice, selfishness and violence. But how many long-married couples succeed in breaking through to this really triumphant love?"

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews: "Marriage is to be honoured by all, and husbands and wives must be faithful to each other. Keep your lives free from the love of money and be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, 'I will never leave you; I will never abandon you'"(Hebs 11.4-5).

Bruce Leslie: “Love by itself is not enough, it must be verified through words, through actions, and by affection. Everybody needs it and no one ever outgrows it. ‘I LOVE YOU’”.

The Apostle Paul: “I pray that your love will keep on growing more and more, together with true knowledge and perfect judgement, so that you will be able to choose what is best. Then your lives will be filled with the truly good qualities which only Jesus Christ can produce, for the glory and praise of God” (Phil 1.9-11)

Robert Quillen: “A happy marriage is the union of two good forgivers”

Prayers

- for ourselves
- for marriages under strain
- for those who have been widowed or divorced
- for those who have never been married
- for couples to be married in our church this year

HYMN: As man and woman we were made

Benediction

May God the Father give us joy; may God the Son give us grace; may God the Holy Spirit fill our hearts with love. And may the blessing of God Almighty be upon us all.

Wedding Music

A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON SABBATICALS

Paul Beasley-Murray

For many years the Baptist Union, as I imagine most other denominations, has encouraged its ministers to take a three-month period of sabbatical every seven years or so after ordination. And what a gift these sabbaticals are! For ministers can become “weary in well-doing”. In the words of Roy Oswald, a distinguished American church consultant: “Like Sisyphus and the rock, there is a repetitive intensity in ministry that exacts its price in weariness of spirit, diminished enthusiasm, a dulling of the capacity to be creative, and a loss of vision and perspective. These