

Marriage Mass 2010.

## HOMILY

Our Mass this afternoon is in Thanksgiving for the Sacrament of Marriage. How fitting that we celebrate this gift of marriage on the Vigil of Pentecost, for it is from the Holy Spirit that this, and all the gifts of God in our lives, truly come.

You know that marriage as a sacrament is a great gift. I congratulate you all on this day as you gather to thank God for the gift of love in marriage in your lives and celebrate significant anniversaries of the day you first made your public commitment to each other.

Let's look again at how the Church understands marriage. This is our teaching:

Marriage is a covenant by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life. It is by its nature ordered toward the good of husband and wife and the procreation and education of children. This covenant between baptised persons is raised by Christ to the dignity of a sacrament (cf. CCC 1601)

That is a very comprehensive statement, a vision of God's plan, a vision of the hope and reality in your hearts.

First, your marriage is the bond you have established between yourselves. It is witnessed to by the Church, on your wedding day and again today.

Secondly it is intended to be life-long and you know better than anyone else how demanding this can be and why we all look with love on those who have not been able to sustain the joyful and intended commitment they gave.

Thirdly, marriage of its nature is bound up not only with the profound personal support you give to each other, through thick and thin, but also with your calling as parents. Not every marriage bears fruit in children. But the intention is there in every Christian marriage and most often a married couple are also parents. But, as you well know, the birth of a child is only just the beginning. Being a parent, which is of the very nature of marriage, is a life-long task bringing with it an intense experience of all the joys and sorrows which mark our pilgrimage through life.

Love is at the heart of marriage. God created us out of love and also calls us to love, for we are created in the image and likeness of God who is himself love. Hence all human loving, in its fidelity and self-giving, can be an image of the absolute and unfailing love of God. This reaches a full and beautiful expression in the faithful love of a man and a woman in marriage. In other words, marriage is a sacrament, a unique, God-given, fruitful sign of God's loving and redeeming presence at work in our world. For this reason, as Christian married couples, you have your own special gifts of grace which are proper to the Sacrament of matrimony and are intended to strengthen and sustain you in all the aspects of your vocation.

It is for all of this that we thank God today. In doing so we also remember that the grace of God, his loving presence in our lives, is not limited to the reach of the

sacraments. The sacraments give clarity and a certainty to the action of God in our lives. But God is not limited by his sacraments and can reach out with his grace with a freedom which can go beyond the sacraments and can touch all who come to him in their hearts. We are very grateful for this.

This, then, is something of the vision of the Church about marriage. Yet this vision is not a creation of the Church. The vocation to marriage is written in our very nature and comes from the hand of the Creator. Marriage is not a purely human institution for its common and permanent characteristics go deeper than any human institutions.

When we look at our society today we know that its well-being passes by way of the family. Families, for better or worse, are the first school of life and love, where the capacity to relate to others, to grow, is founded. Despite family breakdown, many parents provide a loving and stable home for their children. This is, of course, to be applauded and we must always be on the look out for ways in which families can be more clearly and consistently supported.

In our document 'Choosing the Common Good', we bishops stated:

'Families have a right to a life of their own, and governments do well when they interfere as little as possible while supporting parents in the exercise of their responsibilities.' We then added: 'But at the heart of necessary policy initiative to support the stability of couple relationships, it is essential to support marriage.'

The recently published policy document of our Coalition Government contains a number of welcome initiatives in support of the family. But it lacks any specific reference to marriage. Yet marriage brings considerable and measurable benefits to individuals, children, family life and society. It deserves a greater measure of public support. It is therefore very encouraging to see the long list of initiatives at the back of our Mass booklet which give support to marriage and family life. Long may these initiatives flourish and maintain their integrity of vision.

The meditation called for in our celebration of the Eucharist today centres on the gifts of grace, given by the Holy Spirit, so that we may live out as fully as possible the vocation from God which shapes our lives.

The Prophet Joel reminds us that the Spirit of God reaches us in so many different ways, be we sons or daughters, old or young, men or women, slave or free. In the classic image, the gift of the Holy Spirit is like the rain: it always falls as rain, it doesn't change, yet it bears all sorts of different fruit. The same rain helps to produce apples and pears, yellow daffodils and red roses, wheat and barley. In the same way the Holy Spirit produces different gifts in each person. In marriage the Holy Spirit helps you to fulfil the promises and dreams you first expressed to each other, the fruit of intimate and faithful love, creative of new life in children who, in their turn, have a unique spiritual life of their own and an eternal destiny.

St Paul reminds us, thankfully, that this work of the Holy Spirit within us has only just got going. The fruitfulness of your love, for which you give thanks today, is only the 'first fruit', just the beginning, not at all the full quota. Indeed, the promise of the love you have for each other will come to its fulfilment only when you get each other

to heaven. This is the true fruitfulness of married love: that you and your family rejoice together in the fullness of life and love in heaven, when all things are raised to a new creation in Christ. That is why St Paul reminds us that every day here is to be lived in hope and patience. These, too, are gifts of the Holy Spirit, and very necessary for our journey.

But it is the Gospel reading that brings us truly to the heart of this celebration. It is from the side of Christ that the fountain of living water, the gift of the Holy Spirit, flows. This is his wonderful invitation: to come to him, to drink deeply, to know the refreshment that he alone can give, to lose ourselves in him so as to find ourselves, and each other, again.

This we do at Mass, at this Mass. This we can see expounded in the beautiful icon on the front cover of our booklet. Marriage is not simply centred on Christ, but founded, re-founded, and continually built on him, for he is the one in whom we hold together, in whom we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, in whom we find our way to fulfilling the will of the Father. And that is the heart of our journey and the heart of the prayer which we offer today. Father, thy will be done, on earth, in my life, as it is in heaven for all eternity'. Amen

+Vincent Nichols  
Archbishop of Westminster