

Homily preached by The Most Reverend Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster, at Choral Evening Prayer to celebrate Marriage and Family Life

Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, Liverpool

3pm, Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time, 14 February 2010

The Word of God is a light for our eyes and a lamp for our steps. We are always ready and gracious recipients, therefore, of this Word, announced to us this afternoon, and handed over in these Bible texts in the context of married life, in all its stages.

Newly weds have recourse to these words as they begin to fashion a new level of sharing in their lives, for in this Word of God is shown to us the ultimate generosity and love of life shared in deep communion.

Those celebrating anniversaries will have recourse to these words as they not only count the years achieved but also look forward to those that lie ahead. In this precious Word of God they will find the true measure by which to assess the fruitfulness of their lives: measures of forgiveness and mutual compassion, of hope and mutual trust, of thanksgiving and humble asking.

And those who work with others in Marriage Preparation will receive these words with special care, for this living Word of God is given to us as something we can never find or produce on our own. In the word of God there is so much more than the fruit of human experience. This is the gift of God disclosing himself to us, opening to us the inner life of God: the secret heart of the Father, the self-sacrificing love of the Son, and the unwavering creative action of the Holy Spirit. Our Christian life, at its heart, is a sharing in this life of God and in that sharing lie the true foundations of all love and especially the love of married life itself.

St Paul has reminded us that it is in our inner being that we might encounter the 'riches of God's glory' for it is in our inner being that Christ will dwell in faith and the Holy Spirit may grant his strength.

This, of course, is the true heart of marriage as a sacrament of the Church. On the surface, one marriage may look like another: one sacramental, the other not. And it is true that in many marriages God's presence is entirely out of sight, because it was never understood or invoked. Indeed, the understanding that God is involved in a marriage, giving it a different kind of permanence, a different kind of depth, is so foreign to our world that even we people of faith might be in danger of forgetting it, too. Yet a marriage without God is no more than a matter of personal choice and of personal satisfaction. In those circumstances, there is far less reason to work hard at a marriage when that initial satisfaction has gone and the personal choice might seem to have been a mistake.

So today, in this wonderful celebration, we again affirm that only the presence of God makes clear the true nature of marriage. Only God's grace can complete and renew such a relationship. Only then does a relationship become a sacrament which can speak eloquently to our world of the full vocation of married life.

This vision of marriage lies at the centre of the Church's teaching. Without the firm understanding and belief that God is at the heart of every marriage, much of that teaching seems unreasonable and out-dated. The permanence of marriage, which guides the Church's teaching towards those in second marriages, is rooted in the sacramental presence of God in a valid marriage. The call of the Church to a man and a woman to marry rather than simply live together in a private arrangement is based on the same conviction that God's acknowledged presence is essential for a truly mature human relationship of husband and wife. To fail to see this truth inevitably leads us to see marriage as a human value only and so, in the last resort, disposable and replaceable.

In faith, we strive to fulfil the Church's teaching, doing our best to bring our lives into line with God's will, in all the ways open to us. We know that this is our best chance of fulfilment. In every life, without exception, this is a long and slow process. In marriage it certainly can be very testing. So today, it is important that we promote marriage, offering real encouragement to young people and young couples to make the journey into marriage. We must show acceptance and support to those who have experienced failure in their marriage. We are to encourage them in their life of faith, in all the ways the Church shows to us. We must never give up, never abandon hope or effort, knowing always that the Lord is with us, drawing us in his own mysterious ways closer to himself and to those who truly sustain and guard us.

In our prayer this afternoon, we are giving particular attention to the work of preparation for marriage, and to those who gladly engage in that work. It is a precious work, for we know that the foundations of a long and happy marriage are laid down in its earliest years, just as surely as the seeds of later problems are sown in the neglects of that period. Marriage preparation is essentially a spiritual work – a work of the spirit. It is about striving to find that level of communication which can properly be described as 'heart speaking to heart'. It is about overcoming the reluctance to speak together of all the things of the heart: of love, of beauty, of truth and of God. Marriage preparation is about exploring the possibility of praying together, taking those first tentative steps which only slowly grow into a bond of loving faith and faith-filled love which withstand the difficult times when they arrive.

In this work of marriage preparation, the priest has a special place, too. He has been given a mandate at his ordination: not only to preach the Word and to celebrate the Sacraments but also to be the pastor of his people in the name of Christ the Head, a precise task which he cannot delegate to anyone else. Of course, many have a part to play in the work of marriage preparation, but such is the importance of this time, of the step being contemplated, that it most certainly calls for the presence of the pastor, or Father, of the people. May God encourage all of us priests to play our part and to know that in this time of preparation there is a special word of encouragement, guidance and blessing that only we can give.

Now we pause, reflect and listen to the motet, awaiting the return of the children, bearing the gift of roses for us all. This is a beautiful reminder of the gift that is a child, the treasure of children. But they need so much more than our indulgence. They need our careful guidance and tutoring. They are gifts still waiting to be fashioned in the ways of God and yet, at the same time, capable of being God's most remarkable messengers to us all. Let us pray that parents today will indeed accept their responsibilities towards their children as an essential part of the joy of family life.

And a final word. It is of thanks to you all. In all that you do, in the work of marriage preparation, in the witness of a married life, in all of this we are serving the wider good of our society. The stability of our society depends directly on the stability of family life. This is why marriage, as the strongest foundation for stable family life and the best environment for the growth of children, is to be supported in our country today if we are really to pursue, both politically and socially, the genuine common good of all. I thank you for the support that you give and the witness that you bear.

+Vincent Nichols