

Christmas Midnight Mass 2012

It is Not Good for the Man to be Alone.

Isaiah 9 vv 2-7 p693, Ps 96, Titus 2 vv 11-14 p1199, Luke 2 vv 1-20 p1027

This is my twenty fifth Midnight Mass at Cuxton. Some of you here tonight were not even born when I became Rector of Cuxton and Halling on 2nd January 1987 and some of those who were here then are now, it is my sure and certain hope, enjoying eternally the Beatific Vision of the Triune God through Him Who took our flesh upon Him and became human and lived and died and rose again in order that we might be made divine. Perhaps we will be thinking of some of them when we come to that part of the service where we shall say, *Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, we proclaim your great and glorious name, for ever praising you and saying: Holy, holy, holy...*, your worship and mine mingling with the worship of our loved ones in Heaven, with the entire Communion of saints on earth and in Heaven, with the angels and archangels, the cherubim and seraphim and indeed resonating with the eternal dance of love which unites the three divine Persons in the one thrice holy Godhead.

I had a look back over some of my sermons for the last few Midnight Masses. They are on the parish webpage on the internet. I noticed I do tend to speak for rather a long time. That is partly because I am hoping it will actually be Midnight when we sing *Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning*. (You see I have an insufferably literal mind.) It is also because when I have got so many of you here I have a passionate desire to share my faith, to teach and preach the Gospel without holding anything back, to play my part as a preacher of the Word in inspiring you to offer your life to God which is what you must do if you want to experience life in all its fulness.

I also noticed that sometimes what I say on these occasions might be a bit too intellectually challenging for this late hour when we are possibly more attuned to celebration than to cerebration. It is hard to tell. Preachers don't get much feedback, though one year someone had taken the trouble to write on his order of service, *Why do we have to listen to this rubbish anyway?* I hope that's not the general opinion of my sermons. The difficulty with feedback is that people might object to a sermon because it is incomprehensible or irrelevant, but they might also object to a sermon which is only too plainly telling them truths they would rather not hear. A preacher may become popular because he has a reputation for bringing people to know the Lord and for supporting and sustaining the faith of those who already know Jesus as their Saviour or a preacher might be popular simply because he never challenges the complacent or shines the light on hypocrisy and wrong-doing in the name of religion.

I also noticed that I try to lighten the mood with little jokes, which, if I remember rightly, hardly anyone ever laughs at.

Twenty five years. It's good to stay that long in one place and to share people's lives, to be with families in the big occasions of their lives, christenings, confirmations, weddings and funerals as well as in *the trivial round, the common task, which*, John Keble tells us, *will furnish all we need to ask, room to deny ourselves, a road~ to bring us daily nearer God.*

It has also been good to have you share in my life, the good times and the bad, all the things we have achieved over the years and the support I have received from you in times of trouble and sorrow.

After the first few years in a parish you start christening the children of the people you married. After a lot more years you start marrying the people you christened. Some of those you christen you prepare for confirmation. Why not all of them? Eventually you start christening the children of the people you married having christened them, the parents, in the first place. And of course there are the funerals. As Christians, we do not fear death. *Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.* A Christian funeral is a great occasion of faith and hope and love. It is a tremendous privilege if one can offer some support to the bereaved, to those of us who have been separated, albeit only temporarily, from our loved ones by death. It means something to me to be there in years to come as the one who conducted a family funeral and is now celebrating a wedding or a christening or maybe another funeral when, perhaps, Mum is rejoining Dad after years of widowhood.

And to share the whole of life's journey, that daily round and common task: daily and weekly worship; the fulfilment of each person's human potential in working out his or her own salvation, pursuing whatever vocation God has called us to, doing the good works He has prepared for you to walk in; the healing of sickness of body, mind or spirit; the healing of relationships broken by sin, relationships between human beings and God, relationships between human beings and human beings; the conclusion of life's journey, the culmination of our calling, the final and total healing of our failures in the consummation of God's love for us and ours for Him in that Beatific Vision of the Triune God.

Marriage. The first chapters of the Book of Genesis are much more about the way things are, and the reasons why things are this way, than they are about how things came to be the way they are. The *how* questions tend to be questions for Science to answer whereas the *why* questions are questions for religion. Science and religion are complementary in that they both seek the Truth and ultimately Truth resides in God. So don't worry about whether a Six Day Creation or the Garden of Eden or Adam and Eve are historical or scientific facts. Science and history are not the point of these stories. The point of these stories is Who God is, who we are, what the way of the world is and how God, humanity and the universe all relate. So let's be unsophisticated. Let's be like children, simple enough to receive plain truth, and not like adults too smart to recognise the wood for the trees. *The Jews require a sign, says St Paul, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified.*

In Genesis chapter one God creates the universe in six days, light and darkness, heaven and earth, sea and dry land, plants, sun, moon and stars, fish and birds, and animals and human beings in His own image. You can't take it absolutely literally even in its own terms, because it's not meant as a scientific or historical account of the origin of all that is. What matters is that everything which exists is created by God. God is good and what God has made is good. Human beings are like God. It is good to be free, but freedom brings responsibility. Human beings are God's stewards of the universe and we are, therefore,

responsible. We are responsible for what we do with our lives. We are responsible for one another. We are responsible for our stewardship of the things which God has made. We are responsible to God and to one another and to ourselves, but ultimately we are responsible to God as our Judge.

Interestingly, the very next thing after the Six Day Creation is that God rests the seventh day. There is more to life than work. God hallows the seventh day and God gives the sabbath rest to the human race as His free gift to us. It seems to me a shame that we can't find better things to do on the Christian Sabbath than to catch up on housework, homework and gardening or to go shopping! No wonder more and more people treat Sunday as if it were just an ordinary day.

Anyway, Genesis chapter two then retells the story from a different angle. This time we are told that God forms the man out of the dust of the ground and breathes into him the breath of life so that he becomes a living soul. It is probably unwise to be too literal about this as an account of how human beings came into existence. The truth of this story is what we are and how we relate. We are just like the animals in that we are made out of the same stuff. We are what we eat. Dust we are and to dust we shall return. But God has breathed into us the breath of life. We are different from the animals. We have a different and much more profound relationship with our Creator than the animals do. I'm all for animal rights and you can find commandments in the Bible telling us to treat all living things decently. But human rights do transcend animal rights. We are special. We human beings are God breathed. We are more than a particularly highly evolved kind of ape. We owe our human nature to God's design, not merely to an evolutionary process entirely dependent on chance mutation and the survival of the fittest.

God provides for all our needs. In the story this is expressed by His planting the Garden of Eden and placing the man in the garden with all his needs met by the fruits of the garden, including his need of an opportunity to sin by eating the forbidden fruit. If there were no opportunity to sin there would be no freedom and without freedom there could not be true love.

When all man's physical needs have been met, however, God sees that Adam's greatest need has still not been met. God says, *It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.* Human beings need to relate. We need to love and to be loved. We need companionship. We need friends. God brings Adam all the animals and Adam gives them all their names. Pets, farm animals, wild animals, they all impact on our lives in their different ways and our lives would be diminished without them. But none of them proved to be an help meet for Adam. We need other human beings to relate to. Again you might not want to take this too literally in scientific or historical terms, but the story goes on to say that God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and took one of Adam's ribs which he formed into a woman. It is about the way things are, not necessarily about how things came to be this way. Man and woman are made for one another. They are distinct and yet the same. They are two and yet become one in marriage. They are one another's complements. It is true to say that marriage is more than a social contract. It is not something either invented or

defined by governments. Marriage is a fundamental gift of God to the human race. Governments may indeed regulate marriage, but they cannot define marriage. Marriage is the gift of God to human beings not a benefit bestowed by the state out of its own fund of moral largesse.

I'm running out of time. I enjoy taking weddings and I enjoy preparing couples for the ceremony. I often say that it's all in the marriage service and if we all studied what the marriage service says we wouldn't need anyone else to tell us. The principles underlying a successful marriage are like everything important – simple, but profound. Complexity is the last refuge of the scoundrel. Shallowness is society's besetting sin. But everything which is important is simple and profound.

Running quickly through it, the preface says most of it. We marry in the presence of God. Actually we do everything in the presence of God. That's a point worth remembering – a threat and a promise! We seek God's blessing on our marriage as surely we should seek God's blessing on everything we do. Jesus went to a wedding and He is present wherever two or three are gathered together in His Name. He is the most important guest at our wedding, the One we can't see, the One we don't have to set a place for (though some do), but the One Who brings the best gift of them all.

As we've heard, marriage is God's gift in Creation, a gift to all human cultures whether Christian or not – though I like to think we Christians know more about it than others who don't know the Son of God or read the Bible. God's gifts in creation are gifts He gives to everyone whether they believe in Him or not. Atheists breathe God's air, drink His water and eat His food. There isn't any other sort. Only atheists don't know Whom to thank for everything or to Whom they are responsible for how they use their lives. What we do know, as Christians, about marriage that other people might not know, is that it is more than a contract between two people under the aegis of the civil law. It is a holy mystery in which man and woman become one flesh, a relationship which is analogous to the relationship between Christ and the Church.

Pressing on, husband and wife are there to care for one another no matter what happens to them. Marriage is the only proper place for the exercise of our physical feelings for our loved ones, a sacramental expression and effecting of our becoming one flesh with wife or husband, and a loving environment in which children may be born and brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord. Marriage is God's mechanism for the procreation of the human race and the foundation, therefore, of all our other family relationships and friendships. We are here to love not to exploit one another.

Families are in many ways the building blocks of human society and Christian families build Christian communities, where love or charity certainly does begin at home but flows out to encompass the whole of humanity.

All those wonderful things being true of marriage, we pray for and with couples on their wedding day.

Even in civil ceremonies, English couples don't say *I do*. They say *I will*. It's in American films that they say *I do*, but either way the point of that part of the service is that both parties are entering into their marriage of their own free will. Forced marriages are not valid. Shotgun weddings can and should be annulled. You can only marry properly if you marry of your own free will.

In England you can't marry if you're under 16, under 18 without your parents' consent, already married to somebody else, closely related or drunk or insane. You can't get married if you're drunk or insane because you have to consent freely, knowing what you are doing.

And yet you also promise *for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us part*, without knowing how far you'll be tested on these vows, How bad or how poor or how sick can it get? But that's the nature of love. True love is unconditional. True love loves no matter what.

But if the whole of the marriage service were torn up and lost except for one sentence, I think there is one sentence which would still say it all. At the exchange of the ring or rings, the groom says to the bride and the bride says to the groom, *All that I am I give to you*. And that is love *All that I am I give to you*. The rest of the service is the declaration that you are one in marriage (*those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder*), the blessing, seeking God's grace in the Word, the Bible reading and the sermon; sometimes seeking God's grace in the Holy Communion, the nuptial mass; and of course the prayers and the final blessing.

I've run out of time and I really wanted to get on to Christening or Baptism, but it doesn't matter. Because I've pretty well said it all. Baptism and marriage are the same thing except that marriage is a lifelong relationship with another human being and Baptism is the start of an eternal relationship with God. We are not all called to marriage, but we are all invited to be baptised. We can't all have a husband or a wife, but we can all have God. Marriage is for time. Baptism is for eternity. When you come to be baptised you acknowledge that you are in the presence of God. You renounce the sins which alienate. You seek His Blessing. You put your faith in His faithfulness. You commit to Him in love. You commit to the Church and to the world in love. You freely enter into this eternal relationship with God. You promise to love Him unconditionally just as He loves you. You give yourself to Him as Jesus gave Himself to you. You are made one with Christ and He with you and you embark on a life nourished by God's Word and Sacraments and by prayer and blessing till at last you come to the Beatific Vision of the Triune God as was God's purpose for you from the very moment of Creation.

It's been wonderful to share these nearly twenty six years with you and I hope there will be many more, sharing together both the significant and the trivial moments of our lives. But there is an old tradition, that whereas Christians are normally buried facing East in the expectation that Christ will return at His Second Coming to the Mount of Olives just outside Jerusalem, the clergy are buried facing West to meet their parishioners in the expectation of sharing eternity together. Twenty six years. *Flowers of earth and buds of heaven*.