

Trinity 7

Preached by the Revd Canon Michael Roberts

18 7 10

On Friday, Paddy and Mark Vidal–Hall celebrated 50 years of marriage. In one sense that’s not so extraordinary because most of us are living a great deal longer and so the physical odds are that this landmark is more readily achievable. In another, it’s amazing because in all western cultures we are finding it harder to sustain long–term relationships.

A friend went to have her wedding ring resized in anticipation of a silver wedding. The girl at the jewellers listened with incredulity; “25 years? To the *same man?*”! The Russians in the 1950s used to fete mothers who bore and raised more than ten children; ‘mother heroines’ and were awarded a medal. In our own times, we ought to praise and admire the gift of holding to the promises to ‘. . . have and to hold . . . for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part . . .’ Of course, over time one’s hold on those promises strengthens, weakens and consolidates; sometimes it’s easy, and at other times it’s difficult, and occasionally it seems well–nigh impossible. But the qualities of perseverance, of faithfulness, of forgiveness, of being able to run through the inevitable stitches of disillusion and disappointment, find renewed sustenance in that lovely word ‘cherish’, desiring the good of the other out of habit, gratitude and commitment. Society as a whole can only function effectively when those are *its* basic rhythms. And those who actually put them into *practice*

make a generous, stabilising and hopeful contribution to everyone around them. This may not be eye-catching but in their quiet way, it is the very stuff of what makes life possible, let alone fulfilling. The theological buzz-phrase nowadays is 'human flourishing'. Faithfulness, commitment, forgiveness, endurance, delight in the other, these indeed enable human beings to flourish. And these are, of course, the very things that faith seeks to promote and inculcate. The promises of marriage are the promises of a faithful life, a life of faith. We lose that connection at our peril.

The Old Testament reading about three strangers arriving unexpectedly at Abraham and Sarah's tent by the oaks of Mamre is apt for this particular celebration. The story has been made better-known by an ikon painted by the Russian, Andrei Rublev, in the 15th century intended to portray the Trinity. Abraham and his wife had been together for many years into what was then regarded as old age. They had felt / heard a promise they would have a child but it had never materialised. It was one of their major disappointments: one of the might-have-beens. Three strangers arrive and Abraham, as desert custom required, went out of his way to welcome them and offer hospitality. The desert was an *inhospitable* place and it behoved those who lived there to offer whatever they had to ease passage; do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It's how we all get by. So, in words which were later to have an echo in the story of the prodigal son, Abraham saw the three, ran to meet them, honoured them, invited them in, refreshed them and offered the best that was available to eat. He then remains available to them, concerned for their welfare, ' . . . he stood by them under the tree while they ate'.

And so the welcome Abraham and Sarah offered was in turn shown to them. “They said to him, ‘Where is your wife, Sarah?’. And he said, ‘There, in the tent’. Then one said, ‘I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son’”.

After this comes a part of the story that is omitted from the lectionary today but is essential to understanding the passage. Sarah overhears the conversation – and so what the stranger has to say – and laughs. It’s an expression of disbelief, of bitterness, of sour disappointment; it’s all too late. And she is overheard in turn and the stranger who spoke, now described as ‘the Lord’, says, “Why did Sarah laugh? . . . Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and you will have a son”. But Sarah denied it, “I did not laugh”, for she was afraid. He said, “Oh, yes, you did laugh”. God knows our frailty. There’s always something we know in our heart of hearts to be essentially *unfaithful* about disbelief, bitterness and sour disappointment. We would like to believe but cannot yet recognise unbelief’s destructiveness. “I did not laugh”. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Both the Old and New Testament, Judaism and Christianity, have said ‘No’. The outworking of the entire gospel is about the nature of life over death, of resurrection over obliteration, of love over an instinct to turn away.

We come to worship, however often we come to worship, and the central issue we have to grapple with each time is whether behind our hands, within our tent, we actually laugh with disbelief at the impossibility of the promise of life, hope and

blessing. In a way, the safest place to continue unbelief, to laugh the laugh of incredulity, is exactly here in church. We can be in the right place at the right time but not really convinced that the right place has the right answer, yet unwilling to let go the rope we cling to. As a curate, I well remember someone whose leg had been run over by a bus and left terribly damaged. She once said in an unguarded moment that she didn't want to examine her faith too closely because she might find there was nothing there and would lose the support found by coming to church. And God is aware of that dynamic, "Oh, yes, you did laugh". It's not condemnation because the offer of life isn't withdrawn. It *is* a recognition of frailty and yet at the same time a continuation of blessing despite it.

And that brings us back to marriage and celebration. Those majestic, sweeping promises – 'for, better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish' – are ones which we can't possibly know how they are going to be tested. We know, as we make them, that they are intended but there is no chance they are going to be fulfilled completely. They are made by us in our frailty but reaching out to the fullness of human flourishing. Wonderfully, they quite simply reflect what God desires for each one of us. They are a sign of hope, of longing for the good, and the possibility that we can be good to and for each other. We may laugh in disbelief. And that is, in part, just what the world does at present. It longs for the things of love but doesn't really think it's possible. And yet . . . and yet. Martha in the gospel reading is annoyed that she is left with the practical drudgery whilst her sister is not helping as she ought. Jesus, in supporting Mary's attentive reaching out for things spiritual, isn't denying necessity of the practical. He's pointing to the fact that without a proper

motivation for the practical, without an inspiration for ordinary commitments, they become a tedious burden. Martha has fallen into a form of self-righteousness that isn't actually about love but has become resented duty. The story of Abraham, Sarah and the three strangers is one about hospitality, about welcome, about receiving others in both practice and genuineness. It tells of the possibility of receiving God, as we do in the Eucharist. It tells of the possibility of God receiving us and the embracing of possibilities for the present and the future that sometimes – perhaps often – seem *impossible*. It calls us to remember a truth we find hard to grasp, are tempted to laugh at; nothing is impossible for the Lord.

There's a lovely sentence in Ephesians which is translated in the Jerusalem Bible as, 'We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he has *meant* us to live it'. When we are in some way willing to be made by God, to be received by Him, to receive Him and each other, we move from the blessed concept of 'good enough' to the even more blessed sense that our strivings and frailties are caught up in God's wider purposes. A work of art? Even us? The answer is 'yes'. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians, Jesus is not a mixture of 'yes' and 'no' but always 'yes'. 'Yes' we may say to God and to each other. And mean it. And that is nothing to laugh at.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

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