

I love weddings; it is one of the real joys of being a parish priest. As couples who love each other deeply make their vows before God and their families and friends I always feel moved and know that God is at work in their lives and souls. The first wedding I ever conducted will stay in my memory for ever. The couple were quite young and although they clearly loved each other every time I met them they seemed to have a row in front of me. On the day the groom arrived with a black eye sustained on the stag do, the bride was over an hour late, the organist was threatening to walk out and when the bride did arrive she had spilled red wine all down her wedding dress. I suspect the reception ended up in a brawl.

The wedding at Cana in Galilee was probably full of drama too. Running out of drink at a party is about as bad as it gets. Can you hear Mary's tone of voice when she says to Jesus, her son, 'Do something'. I can hear the exasperation and the frustration in her voice and I imagine that she is rolling her eyes just like my mother does to me. This was Jesus' first miracle, until this moment he had lived quietly as a carpenter and he was at the wedding just as an ordinary guest with his mother. The wine runs out – disaster – and Mary tells Jesus to make things right. After a bit of a domestic he blesses the jars of water and order is restored, the bride and groom can party again because Jesus has miraculously enabled there to be more wine, 600 litres of good red wine.

It is no accident that Jesus chooses to perform his first miracle at a wedding banquet. There he is in the everyday experience of the community; he is at the heart of this occasion of joy. His care is not only for the souls of God's people but also for their physical needs, the Jesus we see in this Gospel is the one who meets the needs of ordinary people with compassion and love. Jesus is a guest at the wedding as he is a guest at every wedding; the living God is present whenever a couple promise to love each other in that special covenanted relationship of marriage.

Over the past few years the Church of England has spent a great deal of time debating marriage, its meaning, its boundaries and its legal status. It is fair to say that there is a wide range of opinion amongst Anglicans and probably within this congregation about marriage and especially around questions of who can and cannot be married. Only this week the Bishops have issued a statement saying our doctrine on marriage will not change but that gay people have an honoured place in the life of the church. The Bishops have not used the Bible or the example of Christ to justify their position but they have resorted to tradition and fear to defend this oppressive and loveless document.

I want to be very clear that I believe in marriage, it is a holy thing, it is a sacrament of the Church and at the heart of it is the blessing of God mediated through his church to two people who love each other. I have no interest in devaluing marriage or in any way undermining it. I also believe in equal marriage, I do not believe that any person of integrity and faith should be denied any of the sacraments of the church and I think that

includes marriage. Of course, there are others who disagree, perhaps even in this congregation but it is important that you know where I stand. At present it is not allowed for two people of the same gender to be married in an Anglican church but of course it is possible for gay marriage in the town hall.

Before we all jump to our fixed positions on this question it is very important to look at how our understanding of marriage has changed and evolved over the years. The Christian understanding of marriage has not been fixed for all time and the doctrine of the Church of England has changed as the centuries have passed by.

When this church was first built all Christians in this land were Roman Catholics, this was a Catholic church but Henry the Eighth wanted to divorce Catherine of Aragon and as a consequence in the early part of the 1500s the Church of England was founded. The new Church of England allowed for divorce in certain limited situations. So the very beginnings of our church are built on a changing understanding of marriage.

For many years it was impossible for a person who had been divorced to be remarried in church. But driven by compassion and pastoral sensitivity the Church of England changed its mind. We changed the way we read the bible; we interpreted with reason and love. The teaching became that the ideal was for marriage to be life-long but there was an acknowledgement that ours is faith of new beginnings, of forgiveness and fresh starts and so our doctrine changed. It is now possible in this church for those who have been married before to be married in church for a second time. This is a huge, and in my view welcome, shift, in our understanding of marriage. Things have not always been like this.

In more recent years the United Kingdom, along with many other nations throughout the world, introduced Civil Partnerships, this gave gay couples legal status and certain protections and rights. The Church of England initially opposed this move but has since shifted and now welcomes the introduction of Civil Partnerships. The next logical step, in law, is to offer equal marriage to people of the same gender and this was introduced into English law in 2014 but may not be conducted in an Anglican church.

As a parish priest I can bless a nuclear warhead but I cannot bless two women who love each other.

The Church of England teaches very clearly that gay people have an honoured place in the life of the church; the church has repented of its prejudice against people and now accepts that gay people are made in the image of God. However, the Church lobbied hard to make sure that gay people could not be married in church and that remains the current position.

There is an implication in all this that gay people are somehow less worthy, that our relationships are less loving or less Godly and that we are not worthy of the blessing of God.

This cannot be true. To be told you are welcome but to be denied the sacrament of marriage is, to my mind, double speak and it lacks love, compassion and charity.

In our Gospel for today Jesus was at the heart of a loving celebration and Christ is always present where there is authentic love. If the church wants to speak to the world with integrity and credibility then the scales must fall from the eyes of the Bishops. Yes, not all Christians agree on this issue just like we don't all agree on baptism, salvation and how to read the Bible but we must speak a fresh to each new generation.

We must stop punishing our brothers and sisters and we must open wide our arms in generosity and love as Jesus did. Our understanding of marriage has shifted through the centuries and the current position cannot be the last word. God is bigger than any of us; God is bigger than the Church of England. Being inclusive, being welcoming and accepting of all God's people is the mission of St. Mary's because we are followers of Jesus and it is Christ who shows us how to love our neighbour and it is Christ who shows us how to live with joy and delight.

The Gospel of Christ calls us into lives of love; if we are to speak to God's world about anything that matters then we must keep our gaze on Jesus and work for justice, integrity and inclusion in society and in the church.

I believe in equal marriage NOT because it is fashionable or the way of THIS world. I believe in equal marriage because I believe in a God who made all people equal.