



Second Sunday of Easter
Sunday 1 May 2011

Royal Wedding

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Readings: Acts 2.14a, 22-32; John 20.19-end

These last few days the celebration within our parish boundaries has been fantastic. I am not one usually to wax lyrical about royalty, but Friday was the most wonderful day. It is very strange how a wedding can seem to make the world, albeit briefly, a better place. What was it that made this royal wedding so special? Well, for me it began on Thursday night when a wonderfully diverse thirty-five members of our congregation gathered for the Archers and a Pre Royal Wedding Supper. Brian, from the stall outside, gave me twenty royal wedding flags free, and with red roses on special offer, we were able to decorate the room ready for a supper of roast beef and Yorkshire puddings, not forgetting the vegetarian casserole, followed by trifle decorated with a Union Jack of raspberries, blueberries and cream. Couch Potatoes, our parish-sponsored slim, got royal dispensation for the night. Anyway, during the Eucharist, everyone, in a very genuine and non-nationalistic way, shared the things we thought were the blessings of our nation: like spring and the seasons, and hills and sheep, and Radio 4, and London, and the National Gallery, and the British Museum, and the ability to see art treasures for free, and the London parks and lakes, and the diversity and richness of our multicultural society, and freedom of speech, and peace and safety to walk home at night, and of course, St Martin's, and gay people and lesbian and heterosexual and married and single people recognised and respected for who they are, and sparrows, and a sense of humour, and an ability to laugh at ourselves, and because for better or worse, this nation is our home. After sharing and eating together, having had a bash at singing the National Anthem and Jerusalem slightly out of tune, we set off for a walk down the Mall to Buckingham Place. It was such a warm joyful evening and the pending rain held off. The crowds were already filling up and setting up beds and tents along the side of the road. There were all nationalities and languages and age groups, from the very elderly right down to children and babies. The Mall was alive with people strolling and singing and laughing with Boris Bikes weaving through the crowd, and groups and eccentrics being interviewed about the wedding by reporters from around the world. Even the media seemed transfixed by this royal wedding. We got in behind some of the cameras to wave Brian's plastic flags and laugh, and the joy and sense of excitement was infectious.

Then there was the day itself. Perhaps many of us are just romantics at heart, but the wedding felt beautiful – huge, grand and dignified, with crowds of more than a million, and yet at the same time soft, natural, real, genuine and intimate. It reminded you of all the best weddings you have ever been to – the splendour of Westminster Abbey softened by the spring fresh green leaves of the avenue of maple trees and native flowers, Kate's dress softened by lace and white flowers, their wedding vows spoken without proclamation but with serenity and love, and as in all good liturgy, the prayer, music, and address, by the Bishop of London, did not stand in the way, but focused all the attention on the sacrament we were witnessing: the outward visible sign of love, both their love for one another, the love of the nation in which they were upheld, and the love of God in whom we live and move and have our being.

The Bishop of London began his address quoting the words of Catherine of Sienna "*Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.*"

He went on: "Many people are fearful for the future of today's world, but the message of the celebrations in this country and far beyond its shores is the right one – this is a joyful day! It is good that people in every continent are able to share in these celebrations because this is, as every wedding day should be, (and every act of genuine love), a day of hope." Bishop Richard continued:

“In a sense every wedding is a royal wedding with the bride and groom as king and queen of creation, making a new life together so that life can flow through them into the future.”

It was a day which celebrated love culminating in a much photographed kiss on Buckingham Palace balcony. Yes, it was their love, their romance being celebrated, but also they were the symbols of a love and a unity and sense of goodness at the heart of nationhood to which we can all at moments aspire. That love may seem very inconsequential. It does not take the reality of economic debt away. It does not prevent the cuts, or help students to afford the cost of higher education, or the homeless find accommodation, or help the National Health Service afford the future, neither does it stop the fighting in Libya or end the repression of the people of Syria.

Yet perhaps it does transform the way we see things and the way we see one another. It is like the sun coming out and human goodness, which we have so often taught to be sceptical and suspicious of, coming out of storage into the streets. It was the very meaning of sacrament: the outward visible sign of the invisible grace of God's love. At the centre we witnessed our Christian faith and the Anglican Church doing what it does best, getting out of the way so that what was expressed was not its own power or grandeur or pomposity or divisions, but the eternal nature of God's love, symbolised here in this individual actual sacrament between a young man and woman, and yet at the same time universal and pointing beyond itself towards God's eternal steadfast love for all.

I think that is a small glimpse of what Christ's resurrection is about. On the one hand nothing had changed. There was still the terrifying violence that led to the cross, there was still injustice, there were still religious authorities so fearful for their own authority and power that they could condemn the innocent to death, there was still the Empire, and its occupation, and this group of inconsequential and fairly cowardly followers gathered in an upper room. On the one hand nothing has changed, but on the other hand *everything* has changed, because the love of God has not been extinguished but suddenly seems so much greater than all that tried to extinguish it or to argue that it was futile.

Our Gospel tells us in such a simple and direct way the risen 'Jesus came and stood among them and said "Peace be with you." Peace after the agony of his death. That is the gift of our God – "Peace."

So is the love we celebrate simply a fantasy, the fairy tale which will hit reality, a hope against hope, not the bitter experience of our own tragedies and pain? I think that grief can be like a wound, like an open grave, and it actually ultimately demands a choice in our lives. It is the choice that all of us who watched William and his brother Harry also remember from our national collective memory. It is the memory of those two young boys walking behind the coffin of their mother and opening up in this nation an ocean of grief. And the choice, very simply, is this: will the grave and struggles of our lives be the place where life ends, or where new life and humanity begins? Will goodness be defeated by the world or will our wounds become the signs of resurrection and hope? Will we have the courage to choose peace?

Jesus' first words to his disciples are words of peace: "Peace be with you." "Peace," echoing the words of Christ in the boat, present at the centre of the storm. "Peace. Be still. Why are you frightened? Do you not know that I am with you?" This peace is the only way to life. Straight after his words of peace Jesus says "As the father has sent me, so I send you." Again, we may react with astonishment. How can we possibly be sent out to others when we do not have the confidence or skills? Yet, again and again, we witness that our pain can be healed by acts of love and compassion. And now Christ breathes into them. It is like the kiss of life. Our life from this moment will depend on him – his life of love breathed into us. This is a spirit we never believed we had because it does not come from us, it comes from God. It is a breath providing life even amidst the waves that buffet us. In Gabriel Marcel's words "deep down in me there is something other than me, something further within me than I am myself."

Now John's Gospel brilliantly represents our doubt through the character of Thomas. Thomas, who has not been confronted by the risen Christ, thinks quite rationally that it is all nonsense, fantasy. The Christ he grieves for was wounded in the hands and feet by real nails, was killed on a cross – had a spear thrust his side. How can this make-believe change anything?

And then, Christ appears to him too, calling him to put his hands in those wounds, to witness for himself that the wounds of his death can be transformed into the signs of resurrection. Those wounds cannot be forgotten, but they can become the source of our redemption. The vacated space can become the space of God's presence and new life. Love remains. After the agony of crucifixion and death, Christ points to the wounds, not to accuse them of the past, but to liberate their future. There is no blame. "Beware of religion that teaches you to hate; good religion teaches you to love." See how Christ's emphasis is always on goodness. His own shed blood is not the curse of those who killed him – no, quite the opposite. Christ's blood, his wounded-ness has become for all time a symbol of our forgiveness. Paul Ricoeur said that, as he saw it, the meaning of religion was "to liberate the depths of goodness in people, to go looking for it when it is completely buried." Brother Roger of Taizé put it even more simply: "Choose to love."

"Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire."

On Friday, for a moment, we were caught up in the reflected joy of a wedding, and the world seemed a better place. But the real test is how, within the everyday of the ups and downs and the ordinary, we keep that fire burning, the fire of Christ's risen life and love that we lit last Sunday on the portico and which is symbolised in the burning of this paschal candle. How do we find the same sense of love and hope in the events of our own lives? How do we incarnate that risen life in our most important and often taken for granted relationships, and people we meet – the familiar, and the routine, the sparrow, the home, the workplace, as well as those moments of wonder and joy? How do our own wounds become the signs of love stronger than death – a divine love which cannot be quenched, a love for better for worse, for richer for poorer in sickness and in health till death shall unite us?