

How we relate to others: Being married

When I told Martyn that I was planning to preach on marriage, he practically choked on his cornflakes! And why, because like most of us in church today who is married, getting it right is rarely easy. Last year, I visited a chap whose wife had just died. We met together to plan her funeral and to capture stories about her life for the eulogy. They had been married for over 60 years. Her husband told me that throughout their marriage, they had never spent a day apart, and never, in 62 years, spoke a cross word to the other. *'How did they manage that?'* I remember thinking at the time. *'How could they, in never spending a day apart, never fall out?'* knowing that that would be an impossibility in our house! It's of no surprise to us that St Paul, who wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, that *'Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs'* ... was never married. We'd all love our relationships to be just as Paul describes, but the reality is often very different.

Around 230,000 couples get married in the UK every year. In 1971, it was 400,000. But 120,000 get divorced. The average length of a marriage is now just over 11 years and one in three marriages will be over by the fifteenth anniversary. The alternative to marriage has been a vast increase in co-habitation, and I've yet to marry a couple who weren't already living together. Co-habitation doesn't seem to be a long-term answer, however, because the average length of such a relationship is only about seven years. In the meantime, research tells us that those who co-habit are less healthy and less wealthy, and their relationships are less stable and less faithful than couples who marry. And their children are only half as likely as the children of married couples to live their whole childhood with both parents.

Statistics though, are deceptive: it's real people who get hurt when relationships don't work out. John Pritchard, in his book *'Living Faithfully'*, wonders whether, today, too much pressure is put on the nuclear family, when a few generations ago, the weight was spread more widely amongst the wider family and the community. There was simply much more support when families lived closer to one another, and you were well known by neighbours living nearby. And, *'till death us do part'* didn't quite last as long as it does now, when people may be married for over seventy years. Moreover, Pritchard says, in a society obsessed by feelings, we have much higher expectations than

previous generations of key relationships, with a greater tendency to 'start again' with a new relationship if the first one fails. But sadly, the grass isn't always greener, with over two-thirds of second marriages, and three-quarters of third marriages ending in divorce.

So, what could we do differently? What *is* the answer to a successful marriage? Well, if you google 'top tips for a successful marriage' there's lots of secular advice out there. One such article entitled '10 tips to a successful marriage' begins 'Everyone knows couples who seem to have a very *successful marriage*, and we all know others who really struggle. So what's the difference? Why do some marriages end in the divorce court while others go on to celebrate a golden anniversary after 50 years?' And the 10 top tips:

1. Couples in a successful marriage enjoy each other. They like to be together, talk together, do things together and just spend time with each other
2. Successful couples use '*we*', and '*us*' language, rather than '*I*', '*me*' and '*mine*', a demonstration that they are in this together
3. Successful couples seek and offer forgiveness. They may not forgive and forget, but they do forgive and let it go. When mistakes are made, apologies are given. When they are hurt, they accept the apology. It is said that a husband and wife drove for miles in silence after a terrible argument in which neither would budge. The husband pointed to a mule in a field. '*Relative of yours?*' he asked. '*Yes*', she replied. '*By marriage*'. We have to forgive because none of us is perfect. I read in one article that if any of us struggles in this area, then we should grab a pencil and quickly write down three things that our partner does better than we do – that simple exercise should help us stay humble
4. Couples who succeed are in it for the long haul. They make commitments – not just promises. They don't give up at the first sign of trouble
5. They are positive about each other. They respect each other, empathise with each other and care deeply about what is going on in each other's life. They also give more positive comments to each other than negative ones
6. Successful couples learn and grow together. They go along with the other as new interests develop. If one partner takes up a new hobby, the other is supportive and involved

7. Successful couples never stop dating, which means keeping the romance going, setting aside time for each other on a regular basis and occasionally getting away on romantic holidays
8. They bring each other joy. They know what brings their partner joy and they try to provide opportunities for them to do those things
9. Successful couples adhere to the 60/40 rule. You give 60. You take 40. And that goes for both
10. And, lastly, having similar value systems about the important things such as money, raising children and faith are also key to a successful marriage.

Few of us can argue with this advice from the secular world, but a Christian approach has to be rooted in the fundamental conviction that it is God himself who is the source of love. At weddings, I tell couples that, by making their vows and promises in the presence of God, they are inviting God to be a part of their lives and their marriage. And couples frequently choose today's words from 1 Corinthians 13 as their Bible reading, good words to print out and stick on the fridge for the long haul ahead. What we especially learn from St Paul's words is that love is immensely practical and has to be deeply resilient. John Pritchard says that love is like a glass: it shatters if you hold it too tightly, and it shatters if you hold it too loosely and drop it. But it's rooted in God, who never fails in love, even if we do. Indeed, we could say that we can be absolutely certain that God's love is absolutely certain, and that allows our own love for our special partner to breathe and change and develop. Love should be second nature to us because it's the first nature of God. Love is the projection into the world of what God is, and because we are made in the image of God, love should define us too.

So, what could we do differently?

Pritchard suggests making sure we give each other room to grow. Too many relationships fail because one partner cannot conceive of the other becoming different, gaining new qualifications, new interests, new friends. But very few of us are the person we were 20, 30, 50 years ago, and relationships have to adapt with this change. *'Love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or rude. It does not insist on its own way.'*

And if *'education, education, education'* is the mantra of government after government, then *'communication, communication, communication'* ought to be the mantra of every marriage or partnership, communicating not just the

practical stuff, but also communicating hopes, dreams, fears and anxieties. And this is where many of us come unstuck. We fail to give one another the attention that each deserves, and we ignore the special language of touch in the busyness of competing priorities.

And then there are special gifts that are more than just words, but are key to a healthy relationship – gifts like honesty, thoughtfulness and generosity of spirit.

[Let's watch for a few months how Hyacinth and Richard Bucket manage this. (Play film).

What can we learn from the infamous Buckets? Don't forget the big occasions – birthdays, anniversaries. Prepare to make amends when you mess up even if, like Richard, the speech then becomes unnecessary. And be creative in choosing gifts, knowing what your partner would really appreciate.]

But discipline comes into it too. The discipline of laughter. And the discipline of conflict resolution. One couple said that they heeded the Biblical instruction to never go to bed angry – but once they had to stay up for three whole weeks! We read that *'Love is not irritable or resentful'* but the people we know and love best often irritate us the most. How can we counteract this human frailty? And the discipline of time – booking time ahead in the diary for treats that are just about the two of you, whether that be a film, a meal out, a walk in the countryside or a weekend away. Any successful relationship requires intentional, quality time together. And quality time rarely happens when quantity time is absent.

And, as Christians, sharing your faith together. Worshipping together, even if you have very different preferences – being prepared to sing your partner's tune because you know they enjoy it. And, if possible, praying together, because praying together strengthens the ties that bind. And if your partner isn't a Christian? Then persevere in prayer, knowing that *'love always protects, always trusts and always hopes'*.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Amen.