

Easter 3 B    St Stephen's 9.30 & 11    1 John 3: 1-7  
24.4.21

“Everyone who does what is right, is righteous.” V7

Every year, whilst Rector of St Martin's, I saw from between 10 and 15 couples to arrange their marriage service. Most of them were a little nervous but, as far as I could tell, very much in love, full of hope for the future and believing that each would be the love of their lives.

How many of those marriages survived into old age I'll never know, but it's not hard to guess that quite a few ended in tears or, at best, further apart that when they sat in my study and made their promises in church. So just what happened in those intervening years?

I can remember, as a boy, my mother telling me two things She said: “If a marriage is to be successful you have to work at it.” And then, on another occasion, that “it was the husband's duty to bring the world to his wife”, by which she meant that if she was at home all day looking after young children, it was his duty to stimulate her mind and enlarge her interests. At the time I didn't understand what on earth she was talking about, but I do know now!

It is so easy to give up trying to please each other, taking one another too much for granted. Easy, also, to follow the popular culture of looking for self-fulfilment, rather than the first duty of each the well-being of their partner and children. This can happen so slowly as old interests and friendships once again begin to grow in importance and can so easily draw a couple apart. It is also all too easy to take one another for granted, to spend less time talking together, not only of the daily doings, but also of their deeper feelings, hopes and fears. As the moths pass, a couple slips further apart without realising it.

The metaphor of marriage was often used of the relationship of God to his chosen people, Israel. Over the years they had grown away from God. The outward form was there, just as it is for many couples, but the inner reality of the relationship was in decline. The account of Jesus driving out the money-changers from the Temple illustrates this. It was not that the outward forms of their worship were wrong in themselves, but they can so easily be used to give a false sense of security when, in fact, all is far from well.

What was true for the Jews is also true for us. It is so easy to magnify the minutiae of church life and worship so that they become ends in themselves, now being a barrier to God than opening the way. The bitter arguments over some aspect of ritual, the arguments over hymns and hymnbooks, the dress of the clergy; then there are those who use the church for their pleasure – singing in the choir or bellringing and who have little interest in the church's purpose. Then there are the petty arguments over status and jobs.

Spurgeon once said of certain preachers: “They are great upon the ten toes of the beast, the four faces of the cherubim, the mystical meaning of badgers' skins, the typical

bearings of the staves of the arc and the windows of Solomon's Temple; but the sins of the businessman, the temptations of the times and the needs of the age, they scarcely ever touch upon."

Worship and church life are there to help us become more open to God and we should always try to keep this thought at the front of our minds. There can only be one foundation for the life of faith and that is Jesus Christ.

What is it that causes the first hopes of marriage to fade; for the means of worship to become the ends? John spells it out, and says it is lawlessness, or I would translate that as selfishness, from which most sin comes. The whole emphasis upon self-fulfilment is based on selfishness. There is a moral law which applies to us all – and is not open to majority voting. As has been said: "There is no one who can say that it is quite safe for him to allow himself certain things, although that may be dangerous for others." A.E. Brooke said: "The test of progress is obedience." Progress does not confer privilege to indulge oneself, but to become more disciplined.

Sin is putting oneself before everyone else, God included, and ignoring their needs and our responsibilities. To sin, to be selfish, is to work against Jesus, who came to take away the sin of the world. We too often forget that there are malign forces at work in the world, which the NT refers to as the devil, and which are hostile to God. All too often we think that the forbidden things will enhance our pleasure, when they seldom, if ever, bring satisfaction and draw us away from God, enhancing those evil forces.

In our baptism we received the gift of God's Holy Spirit and, as St Paul says "we are God's temple where the spirit of God dwells." When worship and our church life build this up, then all will prosper; but when they become ends in themselves, faith becomes empty.

You may remember the story of St Peter leading a woman, who had been well-to-do, around heaven. In life, she'd had a large house and beautiful garden and was hoping for something like that in heaven – St Peter seemed to be leading her towards such a house. They stopped outside and her hopes rose.

"That's Joe's house," said St Peter, "I think you knew him." She racked her brains and finally the only Joe she could think of was the village postman. "You don't mean Joe the postman?" She knew who he was by sight, and had seen him in church, and delivering letter to the house. "How did he come to have such a magnificent house?" she asked herself.

Reading her thoughts, St Peter explained: "You see, during his lifetime Joe sent us up all sorts of materials to build with. The plot of land came from his faith, but then he provided for all the materials by his care and concern for others and his willingness to share his faith." "Oh, I see," said the woman, getting a little apprehensive about what might be in store for her.

Sure enough, as they went on the houses became smaller and smaller until they turned into a narrow lane and stopped outside a small, shabby cottage. "This is yours," said St Peter. "I'm afraid it's the best we could do with what you sent us!"

There was a man who lived for 70 years and died, greatly loved. On his tombstone are the words: "He preached goodness by being good."