

I wasn't allowed to watch *Till Death us do Part* for quite some years following its first series in 1965. From my vantage-point either in bed trying to get to sleep, or lurking on the landing, spying on what the adults were up to, I could hear the gales of laughter, and I wanted part of it. But (quite rightly, as I was only seven years old in 1965) it took a few years before my parents relented and let me watch it.

Some years later, from 1985 to 1992 (by which time both of my parents were dead), Warren Mitchell and Dandy Nichols reprised their roles as Alf and Else Garnett. In the first series of *In Sickness and in Health* Dandy Nichols was in the final stages of rheumatoid arthritis, and so the obvious decline of her character was a reflection of the actress's real life, and after the first series the plotline was adjusted to reflect the fact that by then she had died.

I have a number of vivid real-life memories such as the one where the husband of one lady who would catch the same bus as we did to go to church could no longer be left in the house alone because he had got into the habit of sitting on the open fire, and my father would comment to my mother 'In sickness and in health, eh?'

One of the things we don't often hear about the Church's approach to marriage is that the whole notion of getting married in church was not really set down as a thing that Christians ought to do until the late Middle Ages. In some places it was possible for a couple to declare publicly that they were married, and that in itself was enough. Requiring a marriage to be solemnised in church is an historically quite recent thing, reflected in the fact that the Church of England has until recently recognised the validity of any legal marriage, no matter where it is contracted.

What seems always to have been part of the Christian tradition of marriage is that it has to be entered into unconditionally. The formulas written to express this say so clearly in language that remains familiar in the folk memory of this nation:

to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part with this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow

the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity

Apart from the unnecessarily tedious legal hoops I have to put couples through so that they can fulfil the conditions required for them to marry in this church, there is one thing I dare to insist on with couples who want me to marry them: they must be able to look me in the eye and sincerely mean their vows for life. More than ever now, in an age when marriage is no longer a requirement for respectability, it makes no sense to me that a couple would stand before God with fingers crossed about making their life commitment. They know, and I know, and God knows, that things can go wrong, which is why I am happy to re-marry people whose previous marriages have broken down – yet in the sacramental mystery of marriage, it is that unconditional promise which sets the relationship apart. This is the reason why I struggle with the idea of pre-Nuptial agreements, which on one level seem like perfect common sense, but the unconditional nature of the love which people are committing themselves to goes somehow beyond the common sense, and when people make

arrangements whereby aspects of their lives are not fully shared, for me it is at the very least a puzzle.

Surprisingly for an organisation that is itself a sacrament of the God who is love, and which is charged with celebrating the sacramental life of the one whose unconditional love was the breakthrough that reconciled heaven and earth, working our salvation, the Church seems consistently to tie itself in knots when considering love and the human expressions of it. When I was in seminary there remained in the collective memory an echo of the previously long-standing ban on what were called 'particular friendships'. This was a rule that had its origin in monastic life, where it had some sense in that each monk is supposed to relate in a similar way to each other monk, so that the community does not become divided, but the sense fades a little in a community of men who were preparing to cope with priestly life and ministry in the secular world. Family and friendship remain important, and are part of a healthy life – especially in a context where celibacy is required – and the requirement that all relationships be what is called 'disinterested' is a chimera. Human beings have closer relationships with some people than they have with others, but of course the unspoken issue was the sad assumption that if you got close to anyone the relationship had to be, or to become, sexual – and this as you can imagine became, and still remains, a cause of much knicker-twisting within the Church. The fact is that marriage and other similar relationships are not the only places where a human being can experience and express unconditional love. What of the doctors and nurses who go through so much for their patients? What of the firefighters, the aid workers, the Street Pastors: you name it, there are so many

ways for both friendship and service to be expressed unselfishly and unconditionally.

Yet it seems to me that the core reason why there is so much fragmentation in today's society is that we are in the process of losing an understanding of the real value of the unconditional. In so many areas of life it is taken for granted that people will balance the books by working above and beyond the call of duty, and the kickback of this sort of exploitation is a total loss of goodwill, and the realisation that you can't plan for the same unconditionality when personnel change. In the Church, you can have a parish where a priest will work 60 hours or more a week because those are the demands, while the exhortation from above is not to overwork and to take appropriate time off. Yet the forward planning takes that overwork for granted, such that the priest's successor may be labelled as lazy due to unwillingness or lack of capacity to work such hours – or simply due to taking seriously the exhortations to take time off! I have watched this pattern at work elsewhere when I was involved in continuing ministry formation, and I don't think things are getting any better.

It is to the credit of the present King that he throughout his life has worked to help people see the value of giving unconditionally, and has spent much time and money nurturing that aspiration in young people. The focus on volunteering in society is a positive one – so long as it is not met with an assumption on either side that volunteers are there to be exploited.

Jesus talks a lot about the unconditional, telling his disciples such things as we heard this morning: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* and: *Greater love has no one than this – to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

These famous words can make us feel better about ourselves until we start interrogating ourselves as to how firmly we really believe in the one who is promising eternal life, and whether we would actually have it in us to give our lives for our friends. It gets a whole lot worse when we hear him say: *This is my commandment – that you love one another as I have loved you*. Why – we can't even stop ourselves being tied in knots over what loving other people really looks like – let alone take on board Jesus's love as the measure for our love of other people.

So there it is: the Son of Man is lifted up – and for what? To convince us of the impossibility of doing what he has done, of following in his way? Yet it is because of this that martyrdom has been revered in the Church from the very earliest days and continues to be revered today. The ideal put before us can be an impossible ask, or a goal toward which we strive, as Saint Paul says: *forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus*.

In reading the Third Exhortation from the Book of Common Prayer at the early Mass this morning, I was taken, as I often am, by the resonant, beautiful, and deeply scriptural words used in speaking of the grace of the sacrament and of our salvation. But all too often the Prayer Book is lampooned or dismissed for its equally true descriptions of a more challenging sort: the consequences of original sin (divers diseases and sundry kinds of death); the reality of our lives if we live without grace (miserable sinners); the need for humility (we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from beneath thy table).

We can do the same with unconditional love if we want. We can give up because it's impossible; we can live in resentment because when we try to love

others in this way, there's no shortage of people ready to take us for granted or to exploit us; we can hide ourselves away.

Yet the crucifix stands above the chancel of this church as a sign that one has been able to show unconditional love; the sacraments of the Church are both sign and grace that makes it possible for us to share that unconditional love: these things cannot be so easily put away. When at a wedding we recall that the pattern of absolutely committed married love is foreshadowed by the love of Christ for the Church, it is that unconditional love which is meant, and that unconditional love which is lived.

The breakthrough into eternal life wrought by the love shown in the passion and death of Jesus is offered to us, and asked of us – in every relationship, in every act of service. And what he asks of us, he makes possible: again, from the Book of Common Prayer: *Grant to us, Lord, we beseech thee, the spirit to think and do always such things as be rightful; that we, who cannot do any thing that is good without thee, may by thee be enabled to live according to thy will.*

The thing is – Jesus is not just for us what another Collect in the BCP calls an 'ensample of godly life' – he is also the means whereby we can come to live the same life: the sacrifice that takes away our sin. In the Cross we see not only a challenge, but the means that fits us to meet that challenge. For through the Cross we can come to see and understand the same thing shown to Julian of Norwich so many years ago:

And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, 'What may this be?' And it was answered generally thus, 'It is all that is made.'

marvelled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God.

In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it.

God made you and me in unconditional love; the same unconditional love led Jesus to die and rise again for us; and with God's grace even we can walk in the unconditional love that transforms into new life.

PC, 10th March 2024