

## **SERMON FOR THE NAMING OF JESUS | 01.01.2023**

Numbers 6:P 22-27, Galatians 4: 4-7, St Luke 2: 15-21

It was a real delight to be able to celebrate the wedding of **Matt and Amelia Warne** here yesterday. The Church was packed and **Matt's** sister had even flown across from **Australia** with a month-year-old baby for the occasion.

The best reading was a really clever piece called *'Everything I know about love'* by the 30-something English writer, **Dolly Alderton**. She talked about the moments, big and small, when love transforms life – everything from those giddy moments when you proudly introduce your new other half to your work mates and they really get on well together, to picking up the laundry off the bathroom floor or asking what kind of day they had. *I know that love happens under the splendour of the moon and stars and fireworks and sunsets but it also happens when you're lying on a blow-up airbed in a childhood bedroom, sitting in A&E or in the queue for a passport or in a traffic jam. So true.*

But always, at the heart of the marriage service are those time immemorial vows, taking our other halves *for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part*. Which led me to thinking about oaths, pledges, vows and promises.

And I began to reflect on how easily we say we will do something – and how often those promises simply fade away when something else take our attention. We write in Christmas cards that we will keep in touch with people we don't often see; we promise to keep an eye on an elderly neighbour or to give money to a charity. We mean to do all these things when we say it but – well, somehow the moment passes and whatever 'it' is, doesn't get done. We are just so busy...

In fact we are more than a bit wary of people who make too many promises because we have got to the stage when we don't expect them to be kept. **British Gas, Islington Council or the Hospital** say they'll ring back: I don't think that's likely!

So many of the readings in **Advent and Christmas** have been about events coming to pass that were promised long ago. 800 years before **Jesus** the prophet **Isaiah** talked about the coming of **Jesus** to a young virgin; a baby is promised to **Elizabeth** when she is well past the age and a much younger **Mary** is promised a son without her needing to sleep with anyone.

**And yet we struggle with God's promises too. Yes, the Christmas prophecies were all kept – but what about his promise to be with us always, to be with us when we are lonely, or in pain or in need of his help? What kind of promise is that?**

**But we can't turn promises into some kind of 'automatic deal': if we do this then something will always follow'. Promises are part and parcel of a loving relationship. And love – as in that poem we heard yesterday - works like this: *Love at its best is quiet and reassuring, a harmonious kind of a thing; something you can easily forget is there, even though its palms are outstretched beneath you in case you fall.***

**Put another way, we can so easily take each other's love and help for granted – and only make something of it when it seems not to be working.**

**So making vows or promises – making the effort to spell out what we are hoping to do (even if we often fail) - is really important. Every so often we need to make the conscious effort to say to one another, and, actually to God: *when I put my mind to it and don't allow myself to be distracted, this is what I really feel and what I know I ought to be trying to live up to. Right now I want to say – explicitly - what I feel ... so that the other person doesn't feel like they are being taken for granted.***

**The Methodist Covenant, first adapted by John Wesley from some German prayers way back in the first half of the 18th century, is often included in services at the beginning of the New Year. It is a bit like a religious new year's resolution but is rather deeper than that. It tries to restore us to the path to which we have long been committed.**

**It draws on the same positives of the wedding vows. We know these sentiments are true – but just to say them out loud makes them come alive It and helps us to return to the journey we have already started.**

**And so, on this New Year's Day as we start 2023 with all the challenges that will inevitably come our way, I hope we can take these covenant vows and make them our own.**

Christ has many services to be done: some are easy, others are difficult;  
some bring honour, others bring reproach;  
some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests,  
others are contrary to both;  
in some we may please Christ and please ourselves;  
in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves.

Yet the power to do all these things is given to us in Christ,  
who strengthens us.

Therefore let us make this covenant of God our own.

Let us give ourselves to him,  
trusting in his promises and relying on his grace.

**I am no longer my own but yours.**

**Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;**

**put me to doing, put me to suffering;**

**let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,**

**exalted for you or brought low for you;**

**let me be full, let me be empty,**

**let me have all things, let me have nothing.**

**I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things  
to your pleasure and disposal.**

**And now, glorious and blessed God,**

**Father, Son and Holy Spirit,**

**you are mine and I am yours.**

**So be it.**

**And the covenant now made on earth,**

**let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.**