

John and Barbara Walsh Golden Wedding Mass

Today is the Feast of St Francis of Assisi. If you know anything at all about St Francis, the chances are fairly high that furry creatures feature in there somewhere. He is, among other things, the patron saint of animals. There are stories of him taming a wolf, preaching to the birds, befriending a rabbit and that sort of thing, and as a result there's a pretty sickly tendency in the church to portray St Francis as the friend of everything fluffy. He wasn't, as it happens. In fact, he specifically forbids members of his order – the Franciscans – from keeping pets. But it's hard to suppress a story, particularly if a cuddly bunny is involved.

The correct reason to associate St Francis with animals is what he has to say about creation. All created things he calls brother and sister, because all of us are children of the God who made us, the God whose love brings something from nothing in the creation of the world, and brings light from darkness, life from death in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What we in the church call sacraments are events in which creation and the creator come together, a meeting of heaven and earth in which the love of God is worked out through created things, bread and wine in the eucharist, water in baptism, oil in anointing, and people in the sacrament of holy matrimony.

The only thing which is truly creative – which brings something from nothing – is the love of God. In marriage two people are participating in that love bringing something new into being – a creative, loving relationship. And that relationship of love is itself creative, it brings new things to the world. Marriage is a share in the creative love of God not just because human beings are blessed with the privilege of sharing in the miracle of life, as they produce children and nurture them in love, but also because every relationship of love brings new relationships, new events of love, into being.

Those of you who have been lucky enough to know John and Barbara for far longer than I will recognise in them a beacon of Christian love shining brightly for all those around them. The kindness, generosity, warmth, hospitality and fun which we find in them as friends and family are all rooted in the central gift of love which is their commitment and their attachment to one another over these fifty years. It is something to be celebrated and rejoiced at, but also something to be taken very seriously indeed. The love of Christ which is shared in marriage is hardly fashionable in our own world. I don't mean simply that fewer people get married, I mean more that our society seems to treat love and marriage as things which are principally for the benefit of an individual. I love him because... he makes me laugh; I love her because... she's so stylish. The trouble with this approach is that one day the jokes may run

out or the style might have waned. What then? In Christian marriage people there is no “because”, in Christian marriage people are called to love one another unconditionally, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us. The only reason to love one another in marriage is simply the reason that we are who we are.

And we are who we are, ultimately, because of the love of God. It is that love which made us and that love which redeems us, that love which is given to us daily and weekly at the altar in the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood, that love which is celebrated and institutionalised in the gift of holy matrimony. We live in a changing world, a worrying, sometimes violent, always uncertain world in which the speed of events seem to offer us little chance to make a difference. But we’d be wrong to think so, because the greatest difference we can make, the most precious gift we can bring to the world is love, love for one another which flows into love for those around us.

It’s popular to ask the question, why are we here? and the answer isn’t as popular as it should be. We are here to love, nothing more and nothing less. If life is the question, then love is the answer. If you want to know what it looks like, there’s a place you can visit. It’s called The Hollies, Holton, Oxfordshire, and the name you want is Walsh.