

PROMISES

I love the marriage service because it's full of promises. The promise of life together, of commitment, of faithfulness, simply of love. No bride walks up the aisle dreaming that this is the first step towards a glorious separation. We're making big promises here.

Of course some people today hedge their bets around these promises; they have a pre-nuptial contract. I loved a letter in the Times a while back that was on the subject of pre-nuptial contracts. A Mr. Barney Alterman wrote: 'Sir, My wife Miriam and I made a pre-nuptial contract in which we decided *that if ever she left me she would take me with her*. This has been highly successful. We celebrated our 62nd wedding anniversary last December...'

Promises – they're everywhere in the marriage service but particularly in the vows, which are really one of the Church's gifts to the world. They've never been bettered.

I, Martin, Anna, take you, Anna, Martin, to have and to hold from this day forward.

That is, I won't grip too tightly, but I won't let go either. I have you in my life now, and I'll hold you with care, always. This is a promise.

For better, for worse.

That is, whatever happens. We don't know what will come our way, but we'll be there together, and we'll get through, whatever it is. This is a promise.

For richer, for poorer.

That is, money helps, but it doesn't define us. So we won't let it define our happiness because there are other riches we prefer – love joy peace, patience kindness goodness, faithfulness gentleness selfcontrol. This is a promise.

In sickness and in health.

I'll always be there when you need me. Don't ever worry about that. I'm here for you - even with a sick bowl in the middle of the night. This too is a promise.

To love and to cherish.

I might not always manage it, but I'll try to refresh my love for you every day. You'll always be the most important person in my life (along with Tom of course!). This is a promise.

Till death us do part.

I don't want to think about it, but it's going to happen sometime. But I'll always know that you were mine and I was yours - completely. This is a promise.

So, all that I am I give to you and all that I have I share with you, within the love of God.

What more can one human being say to another? All that I am I give to you. This too is a promise.

So, a day of promises.

But it's important to remember one thing: you can't promise a feeling. You can't promise always to feel deeply in love with each other. What you *can* promise is always to love one another. You can't promise a feeling; but you can promise a way of being, a habit of the heart, an attitude of care, an intention to love. *Love* is much bigger than being *in love*.

I think I can say without fear of contradiction that Wendy hasn't always felt distractedly *in love* with me; but bless her, she's always *loved* me, in all my absurdity.

You might make other promises too, like planning regular treats, never forgetting your anniversary, never running out of wine, looking after elderly bishops (just an idea...) Or that old biblical favourite – the promise 'never to let the sun go down on your wrath.' One couple promised that to each other, never to go to sleep still feeling angry with each other. 'Mind you,' they said, 'one time we had to stay up for three weeks.'

These are all promises *you* make. But as Christians there's one great promise you *receive* – and that's the promise of the resurrection,

that never ending source of life, always overflowing the riverbanks of expectation. As you open yourselves to him, God's infinite grace pours from his life into yours. You need never be short of grace at the heart of your marriage

TS Eliot has a lovely image in his poem *Little Gidding* which could well apply to the promise God makes to you today, the promise of what he calls:

A condition of complete simplicity

(Costing not less than everything)

And all shall be well and

All manner of things shall be well

When the tongues of flame are in-folded

Into the crowned knot of fire

And the fire and the rose are one.

May that promise come true in your marriage day by day and year by year – the fire and the rose, one, encompassed by Christ.