

NT: Ephesians 3.14-end
Second Reading: Sonnet 43

The poem read this evening is by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and was dedicated to her beloved husband, Robert Browning, also a poet. They were not the ideal, picture-perfect couple. When they married in 1846, Elizabeth was already suffering from poor health. She was 40 years old, quite elderly for those times, and 6 years older than Robert. They had to keep their relationship a secret from her father who disapproved vehemently and who did indeed disown her when he learned of their wedding.

Not the perfect start to any married life. As you may appreciate, there is enough stress to deal with without having to contend with some of those issues. You might also imagine that there would be competition, possible jealousy about professional success as two published poets but Robert always acknowledged Elizabeth's talent and encouraged her work. Theirs appears to have been a happy, productive relationship which lasted until Elizabeth's death 15 years later.

And the key to this? Love. It didn't matter that she was older and frail, that neither of them were what you'd call handsome, that they could have been seen as professional rivals. They loved one another and the son they were blessed with, and they made a life together based on that love. Robert was even willing to leave England and make a home for his family in Italy where the climate benefitted Elizabeth's poor health.

In this famous poem, Elizabeth Barrett Browning uses all her skills to attempt to describe something of their love, something which cannot truly be defined which is beyond human comprehension.

*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach*

Her words seem to echo those of Paul in his letter to the Ephesians.

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.

Jesus Christ is the living symbol of God's love for each one of us and in several places in scripture he is referred to as the bridegroom united to his bride the Church, the Church being all those of us who are called to know him and follow lovingly in his footsteps. One version of the Preface that is read at the Marriage Service says this:

*as man and woman grow together in love and trust,
they shall be united with one another in heart, body and mind,
as Christ is united with his bride, the Church.*

So Christ, as in all things, is the example set for us in love, the benchmark we must strive to attain. Some of you getting married this year have known each other a long time, most of you already live together, some of you have children and have built a family life. But as the Wedding Preface goes on to say:

In marriage husband and wife belong to one another; and they begin a new life together in the community.

Something will change in your relationship, you are embarking on a new journey together. None of us can say what lies ahead. Please God you will find great happiness together which will carry you through to the end of your days. But sometimes through the vows you are going to make to each other, you may be tested:

*for better; for worse,
for richer; for poorer,
in sickness and in health,*

It is love that will carry you through, love that enables you to put the needs of your spouse before your own, love that can absorb the difficulties and shine a light of hope when all might seem hard, love that will grow with your commitment to each other and empower each one of you to flourish as the person you were intended to be.

When you say your vows to each other, you will be holding hands as you make a binding contract before God and all your family and friends. There is a bronze sculpture of the Clasped Hands of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Try and look it up. It is a profound image of the nature of love and the equal partnership that is marriage.

Rev'd Michelle Montrose

