

MASS IN CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE

**The Friars, Aylesford
Saturday, 30th May 2009**

Homily given by Archbishop Kevin McDonald

I would like to welcome everyone to Aylesford today during National Family Week for this Mass in which those of you celebrating special wedding anniversaries come together to celebrate the great grace of married life and witness together to the value and the goodness of married life. Let's remember too those who have lost their spouses in recent times and are not able to celebrate the anniversary with them, as we thank God for the gift of joy and fidelity in married life.

This is a happy occasion but we cannot but be aware of the sad and serious fact that marriage is in decline in our country and sadly, in decline in the Catholic and wider Christian community, as well as the country at large. That said, it's good to remember that last year 840 couples were prepared in the Diocese for weddings that took place abroad, in Africa, Eastern Europe and many other places. But here in this country, we seem to have just accepted that people will talk about their "partners" and I must say that I think there is a development here in our culture and our society that should be challenged and resisted. The institution of marriage is precious: it's sanctioned by the teaching of Christ and by centuries of Christian tradition, and it is given such a special place in life and in the life of the Church for a reason. Marriage and family life is the basic unit of human society. The other great religions also respect and honour marriage. It expresses the public and permanent commitment that gives strength and security to the very fabric of our society and gives confidence and stability to men, women and their children. I would suggest that two things militate against marriage today. One is the idea of a permanent commitment and the other is what I would call the culture of choice.

The idea of a permanent commitment is hard today. Very little is permanent in our society. Particularly at the moment, jobs are likely to be insecure and people may not be secure in their home. But long before the present economic crisis the idea of permanence and commitment has been under threat. It has certainly affected vocations to the priesthood and religious life. I want to say that the loss of a sense of permanent commitment is the loss of a deep spiritual and human value. And that is related to what I've called the culture of choice. To understand this, let's remember the very first people who had a Christian calling or sense of vocation, those who were called by Christ himself. I'm thinking of the Apostles who left their boats and went to follow Christ. They didn't know what the future would hold; they didn't really know who Jesus was. But they left everything and followed him and gave their lives to him. And Jesus himself in his teaching on marriage said that a man who is marrying will leave father and mother and cleave to his wife. In other words, a Christian vocation whether to religious life or to marriage will always involve letting go, leaving something or some people behind and giving yourself to a new situation, giving yourself to a situation which has a strong element of the unknown. Seeing things in this way involves an act of faith: faith in God's call and faith in the future. As far as marriage is concerned, it means belief that this man or this woman is intended for me. That this person is the one with

whom I will have a relationship that is like no other relationship in my life. Believing that this relationship is the framework in which, within God's purposes, I am to find my stability, my security and my identity as a person. That is the grace and gift of marriage. Of course we must always have the greatest compassion and understanding for those whose marriages don't work out – sometimes through circumstances that are outside the control of either party. But that does not mean that we should give up on the ideal of marriage. The fact that there can be problems in marriage, disagreements, misunderstandings, coldness, jealousy, sometimes even infidelity should not discourage us from continuing to aspire to all that marriage can be; indeed we must give thanks for all the positive things, all the blessings that come specifically from marriage.

At the Bishops' Conference recently, we had a lecture from a Christian professor who said that today we're faced with a new absolutism which goes under the name of equality. Now equality is obviously on the face of it a good thing but it is a word that suggests a way of looking at life that is all about me, and my rights, and what I want. In this way of thinking, no one has the right to question my choices unless my choices interfere with the freedom of another. There's little sense of the common good, of what is good for society. This is perhaps best explained by an example, and I'll take the example of contraception. If you give primacy to individual choice, then the choice of contraception seems logical: a sensible way of controlling fertility in the context of your life choices as a whole. But if we ask the question has contraception been a profound benefit to society then it's hard to say it has. It has been a major factor in creating a culture in which sex is about personal gratification, and personal recreation. It has isolated sexual activity. It has undermined the crucial connection between sex and procreation, a connection that is vital for the flourishing of family life and society.

But let today be a day of thanksgiving for all we can be grateful for as individuals, as couples, and as Church. Let's also remember the plight of all of those couples and families – often large families whose lives are blighted by famine, disease and war. Nothing is more heartbreaking than the sight of a mother who has lost her child in the confusion or migration that often accompanies conflict.

This is tragic because a family should be a place of happiness and holiness. "Home is a holy place" is a phrase we often hear in the context of the Church's work to build up and support the institution of marriage. It is in the home that the faith is "caught" and that children learn to pray as something natural and normal and spontaneous. There is a special spirituality of marriage and of family life which has been part of your life and which brings you here today.

And we should share with others all that is good in marriage and family life. There is a special task of evangelisation in bearing witness to the values of Christian marriage. That is a task that can be yours at any age and any circumstance.

May God continue to bless you in your married lives, and I greet your children, grandchildren, friends and other family members as we receive together the blessing of this Eucharist.