

Ben and Amber, there are many happy people here today and I am one of them. We've looked forward to this day as you set off on a journey together involving a union at the deepest and most profound levels.

I'd like to use as our text to provide context for your vows just 3 verses from the end of Ephesians 5, picking up at v. 30:

“we (i.e. Those for whom Christ died) are members of his body. (31)
“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (32) This is a profound mystery—and I am talking about (the union of) Christ and the (Body of Christ, His) church.

Now this may seem a bit esoteric but let me draw the parallel as you make your vows to each other today.

The parallel begins with the Gospel you know so well and is essentially this: the purpose of Christ's incarnation is that we would be reconciled and be one with the God who loves us despite our sin.

The 2nd part of the parallel is this: The high calling of marriage is that you as a man and a woman, husband and wife, would become one – beyond “one-flesh” to “one-in-heart-and spirit”, one in purpose in knowing and glorifying God – in a way that reflects the union of God and His people in Christ through the cross.

Christian mystics through the ages have seen the steps towards union with God as three:

Purgation – emptying ourselves of pride and self-will so that God can fill us with Himself.

Illumination – the vision of God as the One Jesus calls in one of His parables, the pearl of great price, as the most valuable, the matchless One, worth giving everything for.

Union – oneness with Christ, i.e. the consummation of purpose for which we've been created. This union is beyond words and expression; it's worship, boundless love, majesty.

In Christian marriage we actually walk a similar path:

Ben and Amber, marriage is not first of all for ourselves. In fact we empty ourselves of the drive to put ourselves first, of insisting on our own way, of pleasing ourselves - pleasing rather the other. Marriage includes a self-emptying of our selves in order to embrace the other.

Marriage 2^{ndly} is illumination, a coming to see the worth of the other person. You see the worth of each other now, yes, and my prayer is that this seeing will grow all of your lives. In addition to growth in seeing one another's worth, this illumination of immense worth often comes also as a sudden seeing, a sudden recognition (almost like the disciples at Emmaus), sometimes in a moment of crisis.

And 3^{rdly} marriage is a living in union with each other. Physical yes, but even more deeply a spiritual union of love and self-giving, of knowing and being known, of being in-Christ and Christ in us in a union which points to and reflects our union with God in Christ for His redemptive purposes in this world.

This is true not only for you but for every couple who has spoken these covenant vows in Christ. It's the mystery of marriage-in-Christ.

So let me read the verses of our text again:

“we (who are in Christ) are part of His body. (31) “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” (32): This is a profound mystery—and I am speaking of (the union of) Christ and the (Body of Christ, His) church.

There are challenges along the way but they are essentially spiritual challenges. The challenges are not at root about money or sex or time or communication; they are about self-emptying and about knowing the immeasurable worth of the other and being known and received as such, and about entering so deeply into one another that your union is essentially a spiritual union, the physical just being a symbol and expression of that.

Yes, some will say the picture I’m painting is idealistic, and it is. But it would be only that if it weren’t for Christ.

Already in the OT Hosea points to this new covenant in Christ which pictures God’s relationship with us as marriage.

The One who loves us so much that He became incarnate in a manger and laid down His life for us on the cross says through Hosea, chapter 2:

In that day I will make a covenant (with My people)
so that all may dwell in **safety**. (And it is a relational covenant you are sealing today, not a mere legal contract)
And I will betroth you to me forever.

Yes, I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy.

I will betroth you in **faithfulness**,
and you will know the **LORD**. (Not know about, but know in the Biblical depth of the word, as you will know one another)

Amber and Ben, the blessing the Lord gives you today is one which is forever; it is one in which His loving-kindness cannot be contained.

Kara spoke of this love when she read from Romans 13 a few minutes ago.

Solomon (Song of Songs 8:6f) speaks of a love *as strong as death....which burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame which many waters cannot quench or wash away.*

What else could this be but a love born in heaven, which died on the cross, rose on the 3rd day and which came to empower us on Pentecost and change our lives for eternity.

This is the blessing your parents sought to express as we began this celebration of God’s gift of you to each other.

This is the journey on which the two of you now embark, not only for yourselves but to bring Christ’s light and grace into this beautiful but needy world, including the marriages of this world.

We know you are committed to being a blessing to those around you and even to those you may never know. You’ve invested in the lives of those in Asia, India, Africa, your employees, service organizations and your families.

We see that in your lifestyle, values and choices and know your marriage will be a strength to you as you continue to give of yourselves to the needs of the world, expressing the grace of God in Christ.

The vows you are about to speak are to each other, but they are through your relationship with the Lord who makes you one. Your vows describe the source of strength in your pilgrimage and mission through life.

Building your lives solely
on the foundation of the Lord Jesus Christ and

His self-giving for you
will affect the way you respond to each other, even when you struggle or
fail.

Centring yourselves daily in His Word,
in the power of prayer,
in the reality of the cross,
will help you grow a precious, loving relationship, that will stand in the
storms of life,
and reflect the love of our heavenly Father .

May the Lord bless you with the power of His Holy Spirit to live the love
demonstrated in the cross of Jesus Christ, with one-another and in ministry
for others.

And now may the love of God's own heart fill yours – with God's “never-
stopping-never-giving-up-unbreaking-always-and-forever-love” and equip
you to fulfil your vows faithfully with joy until we stand before Him to give
account on that Final Day.

We rejoice with you! We rejoice for you!

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or
imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to Him be glory
among His people and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever
and ever. Amen.

(Are you ready?)

Vows
Ring Vows

Community Vows of support