

Getting Married in a Church

I recently had cause to observe a Wedding that was led by a Marriage Celebrant. I have no wish to critique the Celebrant's service, but I did find myself thinking about Church Weddings.

I began my ordained ministry in 1981. It was still very popular to be married in a Church, but secular pressures were there, pushing us (the Church) to accept a myriad of 'secular customs' (flower girls spreading flowers up the nave so that the bride could walk on them. Bride's maids processing first, often one at a time and often slip-stepping their way in.)

Once in, the next wish, was that they (the Bridal Couple) be allowed to write their own wedding vows. Given that the agenda driving our response to couples was one of building a good relationship between the church and each couple, we tended to accommodate them.

I well remember in the early nineteen eighties at St Peter's, that we could have up to four weddings each Saturday. Forty weddings a year was not unusual. Masterton, Hawera and Feilding also had large numbers of weddings.

What did happen, was that the constant intrusion of secular customs began to cause unease. In effect, couples were somehow driven by the perception that they hired a church and then handed out instructions as to how the service should take place. In my mind there had to come, a time when these conflicts of understanding, would be addressed.

To begin the process of addressing our differences, I realised that first and foremost, couples needed to be given access to what the Church thinks about marriage, before they actually began planning where and how. To address that issue, I designed a Marriage Brochure.

Interestingly, some of my younger colleagues did not agree with my thinking, preferring instead to go with the emerging customs. I held my ground, reasoning that if I didn't try, the situation would continue to drift away from the Church.

Even more interesting, was the fact that when I introduced the brochure, there was a dramatic change. Instead of pushing back, a high percentage of couples welcomed the brochure. They found it helpful and welcomed the clarity. When wedding enquiries arrived, I responded by Mailing out a brochure. To help readers to see what I said on the Brochure, I am including the first two items of the Brochure

First Things First

Let's begin by saying that we are glad that you are considering being married in a church. This leaflet outlines most of what you need to know when considering a Church Wedding.

Booking In

There seems to be a general conception that people can ring and book the Church, a little like booking a hall. This is not at all what happens.

When you come to the church for your wedding, you are effectively asking the church to make sacred the union you are about to begin. The church for it's part, delights in the opportunity to take part in such a wonderful event and draws on it's sacred traditions and rites as it blesses your marriage. Effectively, you come into our spiritual home as a guest and we will offer you every assistance we can to include you within our customs.

Sometimes, couples will want to bring customs, or ways of doing things, that come from non church origins. These do not always fit in with the ways of the church. You will need to speak to us in detail about things you might want to do.

In short, you do not hire a church. Rather you seek to have the church bestow Christ's blessing on your union. To do this, it draws on it's sacred traditions and rites.

I have long known that being too black and white about things does not win you friends. On the other hand, just as a reed blowing this way and that in the wind (Matthew 11:7) is a metaphor for indecision, there has to be a middle way in which integrity holds for everyone. The brochure achieved that position.

A caution

The purpose of this short chat about weddings is to respond to a question that some may ask;

“What does the Church have to say about weddings?”

It does not in any way set out to demean secular choices, nor is it a universal choice of the Church. Different Clergy often have differing views. Neither is this necessarily the view of St Peter's. In short, it is an explanation about how I personally approached a difficult issue during my various roles as Vicar or Rural Dean. If this raises questions that any would like to discuss, I am happy to be available.

Ross F Downes 14/2/202