

Variety so the cliché has it is the spice of life. Variety is the spice of life. If this is the case, then there is nothing blander, more beige, more vanilla, more flavourless, more tasteless and less spicy than a wedding. Odd isn't it? All those months, years of preparation for their special day, all that nervous energy fretting about what to wear and what to do and when to do it and who to invite and who can we get away with not inviting... And still your wedding ends up remarkably like everybody else's.

Of course the weddings I see are in the Church of England where conformity is the mortar that holds the bricks of the crumbling building together, and the service is a solemn legal ceremony, a set pattern of set words with no variation allowed, but the potential for branching out is still there in abundance at a wedding... and rarely grasped.

Which, I hasten to add, is fine by me. It makes things a lot easier for the celebrant. Most brides enter this church to Wagner's Bridal march or Pachelbel's Canon and pretty much all newly legally joined couples leave to Mendelssohn. One father of the bride is indistinguishable from another not only in behaviour and jokes- always the same and always lame- but after a while they all tend to look alike as well. Same for mothers, bridesmaids, ushers and best man: even when there are several best men, they appear to have been cloned. The hymns? Give me joy in my heart, All things bright and beautiful, Jerusalem, Lord of the Dance. The Bible reading is invariably that same chapter from one Corinthians. This is no bad thing: it's a beautifully poetic and powerful passage one never tires of hearing and rather than Solomon's pomegranates and romping gazelles or Tobias marrying his sister, both alternative options but rarely chosen. My wedding service book is covered in garish coloured sticky notes emblazoned with the names of the bride and groom not only because under the pressure of standing at the front of a church packed with rowdy strangers, the one thing you're certain to forget is the participant's names, but also because though I know that these are all unique, quirky, interesting and despite the odd bridezilla, loveable and lovely individuals, they do all tend to become the same couple when scrubbed up within an inch of their lives on their wedding day. Even when a whippet is part of the bridal procession- happened here, happens up north all the time- said pooch still comes sporting a requisite bow tie.

Weddings are major life events so perhaps it's inevitable everybody falls back on what they think is traditional, but the tendency to end up with the same thing as everybody else is there through all our lives. Since the 1980s the mantra in economics and politics has always been choice and competition but actually however

great that sounds, however much we agree, it's barking up the wrong tree: see how we behave, and we all want the same thing. Sometimes we want the same thing because we know everybody else wants it and we want to be like everybody else; sometimes we don't really know what anybody else wants, but we still end up all wanting the same thing anyway. VHS videos, Windows computers, iPhones: give us enough time and we whittle down any initial explosion of variety to the same thing. Pink Lady apples, cheddar cheese, straightened hair and hipster beards; same, same, same/ Eventually we'll all be saying in perfect unison 'yes we are all individuals'.

Made from the same mould, it's unsurprising we all want the same thing, and most of all the thing we all want is love. Love, the many splendored thing, love the driving force of the world, love stronger than death, love turning grown men and women into starry-eyed fools. Love is all we want and love is what we all want.

And why? Because there - where love is- we will find God.

From the day we were conceived our souls have been yearning for God and what draws us to each other in love, what makes us fall in love, is our soul's searching, reaching for God. To the extent then that weddings are celebrations of love- which despite some vestiges of patriarchy and property by and large they are- then they speak to us of God. How come? The first letter of St John- dig it out and read it, you won't be disappointed- that letter gives us it straight. God is love.

Frequently in the Scriptures, when referring to the relationship of God to his people or Jesus to the church (which is simply an Old testament / New testament way of saying the same thing), that relationship is compared to a marriage. That's not to make a point about male and female but to make a point about being committed and dedicated to another person- and, most astonishingly enough- vulnerable to them. Because that's what happens if you love someone. If you love someone then you make yourself vulnerable to them: vulnerable to the hurt and pain of rejection, vulnerable to disappointment. If you give your heart away, your heart can be broken. If you love someone then you make yourself vulnerable to them. And by loving us, God makes himself vulnerable. To us.

Just take a moment to think about that.

By loving us, God- creator of the universe, God ineffable, immortal, invisible, unknowable Trinity- makes himself vulnerable. To us.

And when that has started to sink in, we can blow our minds some more, because God when God loves us; well not only does love flow from God to us, God comes to us as a suitor. God *asks* for our love. God asks for your love. Asks!

The creator of all that is, seen and unseen; the all powerful almighty, omnipotent, omniscient, ineffable, immortal, invisible, unknowable triune Godhead, asks for your love. And not just yours. You're not the sole object of his devotion. God's love is promiscuous. It's never all about you.

God asks, as the author Rebecca West shockingly if accurately put it ' God asks for the love of the murderer, the drunkard, the liar, the beggar, the thief'  
None of us deserve it. None of us merit it. And yet God asks for our love.

God loves us. God asks for our love. In a sense God cannot but do this, for God is love.

God is love. If we are to be God's people, if we are to be his bride and groom, we *also* must become love.

How?

How do we become that love? How do we become Christians, how will we have that love such that when people see they will know straight away that we are Jesus' disciples? We must ask ourselves, just how Christian, how loving is my life? You can know the Bible back to front, quote every chapter, every verse and still not speak a word of the language of God, the language of life, the language of love. Scripture learning is not the measure. Instead we must ask ourselves, how much does my life look like love? How will we know? What does love look like? When we want to be told the truth about love, where do we go?

To answer this torrent of questions I think we should go back to the wedding-remember that? About 5 minutes ago, the one with the fascinators and the same hymns and the interchangeable best men. If we want to know the look of love we need go no further than pretty much any church wedding. Not for the happy couple themselves, though I'm sure all of them, almost, are in love. Not back to them then, but to that reading from the Bible, that one reading that all weddings seem to have, the one reading to rule them all.

What does love look like? Here goes, St Paul.

*Love is patient; love is kind;*

*love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.*

*it does not insist on its own way;*

*it is not irritable or resentful;*

*it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.*

*It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*Love never ends.*

That then is the touchstone for Jesus's followers. That is the test for those who would be God's people, that's how to answer the question 'is God here'? Don't ask yourself how orthodox your belief is. Don't ask if your faith is Bible-based, whatever that means. Ask instead, is this what you see reflected back in the mirror, however dimly?

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*It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

This is the love of God. This is love that never ends.