

“We don’t need some parson mumbling over us.”

Today’s Extra Reading is from *The Lyre of Orpheus* by Robertson Davies. The Rev Simon Darcourt is talking to his friends Arthur and Maria Cornish.

“Did she say why they don’t get married, if they are so devoted?” asked Simon.

“Indeed she did”, said Maria. “She has a cliché for everything. They do not admit that their union would be hallowed more than it is if some parson mumbled a few words over them.”

“I wonder why people like that always talk about parsons mumbling a few words,” said Simon. “I’ve married lots of people and I never mumble. I would scorn to mumble!”

“You have no respect for cliché,” laughed Maria. “Performing your ignominious, outdated office you ought to mumble for very shame.”

“I see. I’ll remember that. Am I to mumble at the christening, by the way? I’d very much like to.”

“Of course, Simon dear. Mumble, mumble, mumble.”

Like Simon Darcourt in Robertson Davies’s novel, I have conducted many weddings. Like him, I utterly deny that I mumble. Like him, I would scorn to mumble.

Mumbling apart, however, is it really necessary that there should be a ceremony to celebrate the birth of a baby and to assure that baby of God’s love? Is it necessary to have a ceremony to celebrate two people starting a new life together? Is it necessary to have a ceremony of any kind to mark someone’s death?

Well, I would agree that such ceremony is not actually **necessary**. When a child is born, the parents, with or without a ceremony, commit themselves to love and care for their child. Marriage is basically the decision that two people make to commit their lives to each other. When someone dies, it would be perfectly possible just to arrange for the body to be quietly disposed of without any kind of ceremony.

Ceremony, then, may not be **necessary**. All the same, throughout most of human history people have wanted to mark these occasions with ceremony. The earliest evidence for anything like religion is found in the uncovering of ancient tombs and graves. The poet Philip Larkin, reflecting on the historic role of churches, wrote that they were built for “marriage, and birth, and death, and thoughts of these.”

Nowadays, it's true, far fewer parents seek baptism for their children. But most couples setting out on their married life together still want a ceremony. It may not be a church ceremony: it may be what is called a humanist ceremony, or they may make their commitment in the presence of a registrar; only a few, although their numbers are growing, simply set up home together without any ceremony. Of the three occasions I have mentioned, funerals remain almost universal: again, some may be humanist funerals, but I have never heard of anyone simply phoning the council and asking them to take the body away.

We do seem to need to celebrate the great moments in our lives. Even if the parson does mumble, we want him there, we want him to help us make a fuss about things that are worth making a fuss about.

I think there are two problems. First of all, the church has too often said, and still too often says, that the ceremonies **are** necessary. The church has said that if your child is not baptised he cannot receive God's love. The church has said that if you don't get married in church you're not really married. The church has said that if there is not a proper church funeral, your loved ones are somehow not accepted by God.

All that we must reject.

We need to repent for the emotional suffering we have caused by saying such things. And we need to be careful to avoid even seeming to say such things today.

In baptism, we announce God's love for the child, who has been loved from birth and before. We offer the parents the opportunity to make a public declaration of their commitment to love and care for their child – a commitment they have already privately made. We are not claiming that the baptism actually confers God's love on the child as

churches historically have usually claimed. I also think, of course, that one reason fewer children have been being baptised has been the church's insistence that only the children of church members can be baptised. We seem to be moving away from that, and I am pleased that in the latest version of the baptismal service the child is baptised before the parents are asked to declare their commitment.

What of marriage? There are all sorts of cynical things that people can and do say about marriage in church these days. *It's only an excuse to dress up and have a party. They want to get married in church because it's a beautiful setting for the wedding photographs. It has become ridiculously expensive.* I've said some of these things myself. It **has** become too expensive. The photographs **have** become far too important: it takes less than half an hour to get married and two hours to get your photographs taken! I've been heard to say that people seem to think that, never mind the ceremony, you're not really married until you've have had hundreds of photographs taken to prove it. I've also been heard to say that if I am ever in court charged with murder the victim will be a wedding photographer.

But when all's said and done, there's something real here. There's a sense that it must be done properly. Not only would I deny that I mumble, I would also deny that couples are taking it too lightly. I have found that couples coming to me to arrange a marriage take the ceremony very seriously and want to get it right. Never mind the frills, here are two people making a public declaration of their love and of their commitment to each other. That can never be out of date.

Less needs to be said about funerals. People need no convincing that when the life of someone they love comes to an end it is necessary to celebrate that life and say a proper farewell.

To return to where we began: whether or not the parson mumbles, is ceremony necessary? I have said that it is not. I have suggested, however, that it is good. It is good because without it our lives are impoverished. It is good because when we do it well it meets basic human needs and desires.

When we do it well; and of course we have not always done it well. A professional colleague of mine when I was a teacher had lived with the same man for twenty years, and they had children to whom they were utterly committed, but they had never married. When I said that in my eyes they were married, she indignantly denied it. For her, the very idea of marriage was wrong. It treated a woman as a piece of property: so long as she was single, she belonged to her father, or failing him to a senior male relative; when she married, he gave her away and she became her husband's property. And, of course, that is how many earlier societies did actually think of women; and although society no longer thinks like that, and our laws acknowledge the equality and independence of women, the traditional form of the marriage service still expresses that old idea. We talk of the bride's father giving her away and although we no longer mean it literally it remains a powerful idea. The Church of Scotland marriage service, as it happens, never did include a reference to the bride being given away, but it remains in the popular idea of marriage even in Scotland.

So the form of any ceremony, and the words used, need to express what is really happening. But I would still want to say to people who don't want ceremony, that no, it's not necessary: the commitment of parents to their child does not depend on any ceremony, nor is God's love denied to unbaptized children; when two people come together in love and mutual commitment the ceremony does not create the marriage, it celebrates it; when someone dies we celebrate the life that has been lived and, again, announce and celebrate the unquenchable love of God, but the value of that life and the reality of God's love do not depend on the ceremony. To suggest that the ceremony is necessary makes it magic in the worst sense of the word: manipulating God, making God's love dependent on the words and actions of the ceremony.

All that is true; but I still believe that words of ceremony, preferably not mumbled, are a real and a valuable way of celebrating the great moments of life.

