

# The Service of Matrimony at King's Chapel: Explained

## by the Rev. Dr. Carl Scovel, Senior Minister Emeritus

Our wedding service, an old English translation of the medieval ritual, is at least five hundred years old. From time to time it has been revised, usually not very much. Here at King's Chapel we have used it for over three hundred years, slightly altered from its Anglican original. (For example, in 1785 they changed the service so that the woman no longer promises to obey the man.) At least several thousand couples have been married with this service in our present sanctuary (built in 1749) or its predecessor (built in 1686).

The service has five parts:

- I. The Opening
- II. The Instruction
- III. The Vows and Exchange of Rings
- IV. The Prayers
- V. The Pronouncement and Benediction

### I. THE OPENING

Centuries ago, the wedding service began not in a church but on the steps in front of the church where the opening part was read. The wedding party (bride, groom, family, friends, observers) arrived usually the morning after all-night celebrations at both houses. The priest then read the opening, which now consists of five parts:

1. The announcement of why we have gathered, beginning with "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together in the sight of God and in the presence of this company . . ."
2. The charges to the congregation and the couple.
3. The declaration of consent. The minister asks the couple if they now intend to marry each other. Notice that the couple are asked not just to love each other, but to comfort, honor and keep each other, and not just in health and joy but in sorrow and sickness as well. This is a public statement of the couple's intention to move forward with the joy and responsibilities of marriage.
4. The charge to the congregation to stand by and hold up the couple in the keeping of these vows. Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to keep a marriage. Just as your family, friends and colleagues have been a part of your courtship so they will be a part of your marriage as well. They will affect you and you will affect them. So they should pledge themselves to support you.
5. We sometimes acknowledge the one or ones who escort the bride, more so now the groom as well, as representing their families and support.

## II. THE INSTRUCTION

This consists of the reading and the homily.

Because we are a liberal Christian church we read these scriptures seriously but not literally. We rely on the Christian scriptures for guidance. You can find suggested readings in a collection which is either appended to this letter or will be given to you separately.

Think carefully about these readings. They teach the do's and don't's of living in community, whether the community consists of two or a thousand. The readings which you choose should reflect the counsel which you think you need in getting married.

If you have a favorite poem or passage, not from the Bible, we certainly will permit that to be read as well. Discuss this with the clergy.

You may wish to ask one or more members of the family to read the lessons, and we encourage that.

After the readings the Minister may give a very short homily (of 3 or 4 minutes) based on your conversations together and the lessons you have chosen.

## III. THE VOWS AND THE EXCHANGE OF RINGS

The vows which you say are the *spoken* symbol of your intention towards each other. The rings which you exchange are the *tangible* symbol of your intention towards each other.

The vows printed in the service assume that you trust each other (no secrets at this point!), care for each other and want to live and work together as long as you both shall live.

Some couples prefer to use other vows. A few write their own. This is up to the discretion of the clergy.

After the exchange of vows comes the exchange of rings.

The exchange of the vows and rings constitute the basic act of marriage in the wedding ceremony. The clergy don't marry you. You marry each other. You do so by making each other a promise and by giving each other a tangible sign of that promise.

#### IV. THE PRAYERS

The church understands that you make your promises to each other not just in the presence of the congregation but in God's presence as well. The first words of the service say that "we are gathered together in the sight of God and in the presence of this congregation."

You have made your promises, mindful of God's presence, as you understand God's presence. Since prayer is one way of being mindful of God's presence, now that you have promised each other to each other, we now pray.

The first thing you do as a married couple is pray.

We can pray for a few different things. First and foremost, we thank God that you found each other and we ask God to guide you and teach you how to live in peace and affection. Second, we have the option of praying for children to be born to you and/or those already born to you, who will be part of your home. (Some couples do not plan on having children and in this case we exclude these prayers.) Third, we can pray for the congregation, family and friends, who will be part of your life together, who will influence you and whom you will influence.

Finally, we pray together the Lord's Prayer which is a good prayer for married couples as everyone else. In this prayer we praise God, and we ask for the basics: daily bread, forgiveness and protection from harm.

Some couples want the congregation to say the General Thanksgiving at their weddings and so we have included it, although it is not required.

#### V. THE PRONOUNCEMENT AND BENEDICTION

At the end of the service the Minister reads the pronouncement, which begins with the words, "Forasmuch as N. and N. have consented together in wedlock . . ." The pronouncement tells the congregation that this is a wedding, sanctioned by the state, and not only a blessing of a commitment. Then comes the benediction (a going forth!).