



## Royal wedding reflections

It was hard not to take a professional interest in the Royal Wedding last Saturday, but I was delighted to find that not only was the ceremony really good, but the thing that people were talking about afterwards was the sermon, by Michael Curry, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopalian (Anglican) Church in the United States. Not the dress, the celebrities or the hair cuts (though all of these got a look-in) but the sermon.

Royal weddings are particularly significant for the Church of England because they are the most watched acts of liturgy we ever do. Over a billion people are said to have tuned into this one. By contrast, the last wedding I took had 40 in the congregation, though I like to think it was just as meaningful.

What, I think, the Royal Wedding got right in particular was that they demonstrated the Church can be both... and...

What I mean by that is that outsiders tend to think that the Church must be **either** traditional and stuffy albeit reverent, **or** modern and informal but lacking substance. When we get it right, in fact the Church can hold both at the same time; both modern and traditional; both formal and informal. There's enough depth in the words we use that it can't help be powerful; but we're open to freshness too and are happy to blow off cobwebs.

A few years ago, I got irritated by an article in a local magazine from a civil celebrant of funerals. Broadly

speaking, his argument was that traditional, religious funerals were all very well, but many people now prefer for the coffin to leave to Queen, rather than to Elgar. And that was, in his eyes, where civil celebrations of funerals came in. I didn't mind that he was advertising civil funerals: what I was cross about was the idea that the Church would necessarily have said 'No' to a bit of Queen, or Michael Jackson, or Elton John, or Bruce Springsteen... all of whom have been played at funerals I have taken in the last twelve months, all with my blessing.

Playing 'Thunder Road' does not preclude one using the words 'Ashes to ashes' as the coffin descends into the grave; playing 'Can you feel the love tonight?' does not preclude a meaningful reflection on the nature of life and death, not does it mean one cannot sing 'Abide With Me' elsewhere in the service. We can do both one and the other.

And what Michael Curry showed was that one could deliver a sermon in a way that was conversational and substantial. Ultimately, he was placing love in the context not just of marriage, but of slavery, not just in the United States but in the Ancient Near East and proclaiming how love can overcome, as embodied in Jesus Christ. No shortage of depth there, but put in a fresh way (albeit I admit that he went on a bit too long). I'm hoping for more 'both...and' moments, and Harry and Meghan's wedding provided a spark.

*May 2018. for the Train is a short column by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at [www.surbitonchurch.org.uk](http://www.surbitonchurch.org.uk).*