

JND Speech

In the marriage service Jonathan pointed out that

Marriage is given as the foundation of family life in which children are nurtured.

A little later he asked the congregation

“Who brings this woman to be married to this man?”

And I replied

“I do”

I passed her hand to Jonathan, and he to Mike.

What did that mean?

You may suppose I had rid myself of responsibility for Caroline, passing that on to Mike.

That is true. She is Mrs Storey. Mike is now her next of kin; and my role is changed. No more bills for me, Mike!

But that is not all.

In consenting to my handing her over, Caroline has accepted her new responsibility to love and care for Mike. She expressed her vow in those lovely phrases:

To have and to hold from this day forward;

for better, for worse,
for richer, for poorer,
in sickness and in health,
to love and to cherish,
till death us do part.

But that is not all either.

Caroline has also consented to hold in love from this day, two other people:
Ben and Felix.

But that is still not all, not for me.

I have two other children; each has married. Anna has taken Stu; Dan has taken Jenny. Some would say I have a son-in-law and a daughter-in-law. But I don't like those terms. I regard Stu as a son, and Jenny as a daughter. Between them all they have five children.

So until this morning I have been blessed with five children and five grandchildren. Now, this afternoon, I have six children and seven grandchildren.

I am a fast worker, you see.

In handing over Caroline to Mike I have taken on more responsibility, not less, because

Marriage makes family life in which children and grandchildren are nurtured.

I have a pair of old friends, like a pair of turtle-doves they are, who have a daughter. When Laura married, someone said, as you do, "Don't think of it as losing a daughter, but as gaining a son." In his speech as bridegroom, Ronnie said, "Don't think of it as losing a daughter. Think of it as gaining a garage."

Well, early in March this year I had a text from Caroline: "I can come over on Sunday, if you like. I could help to clear out your garage." So I replied, "Cool" or something like that. Two days later, another text: "I could bring a friend who has a van. Maybe we could take my stuff back to the mainland in his van." So I replied. "Awesome", or something like that. I live on the Isle of Wight, you see. Yet another two days passed. Another text: "There may be two small helpers!" I began to think that I might be on my way to gaining a garage.

So that is what happened. Mike shoved most of Caroline's stuff into his van, and even offered to dispose of all my own rubbish. So I thought: "Perfect! Mike seems like a useful chap to have around the place."

There remained the base of an old divan bed. Too bulky to get into the van. “No problem”, said Mike. “I happen to have in the van an extremely sharp Japanese saw.” Who is this guy, thought I: some sort of magician? The bed was sawn up in less than a minute and disappeared into the van.

We walked together to Yarmouth’s swimming beach, just past the small nature reserve at the mouth of the River Yar. The Brent Geese had all gone on their way, if I remember correctly, but we did see some other wild life. If you looked up the information sheet that came with your wedding invitation, you’ll have seen the photo I took there in Yarmouth on 15 March, just three months ago.

But I expect you want me to say something about Caroline. I am not her best man, so I won’t embarrass her by revealing all her early escapades. Just a few of them.

Some ladies of my acquaintance have been known to think of dressing up for a great occasion, starting with a favourite but hardly ever worn accessory: perhaps a green suede belt. Perhaps that beautiful belt would mean a new dress, certainly a new pair of shoes, and of course her wardrobe would not have a suitable handbag. Well, that was more or less my problem last week. I had this tie, and needed stuff to go with it. Caroline was about seven years old when she made it for me. It comes out on really special occasions. So of course I had to wear it today.

What else?

Caroline has appeared on the stage of the Mayflower Theatre in Southampton. She has more brownie badges than anyone else I know. She can play the violin, and with her guitar she’s made a decent sum by busking in Winchester and on the London tube. She is often the star attraction in pub gigs around the place.

Recently she took up stealth camping, stringing her hammock between trees. Was that before or after she met Mike? You’d have to ask her. Caroline spent a year as an *au pair* in Vienna. She sang solos in the Votivkirche and joined a couple of folk groups there. After a year in Vienna she was invited to join the Austrian youth volunteers in Romania, so spent six weeks in Brasov helping to rebuild part of the university. Then she returned home via Amsterdam with a Romanian guitar, a small dog and someone called (oh, let’s forget about him ...

Next move: a degree in microbiology from Bristol. Caroline part-funded that by working successively in a second-hand clothes shop where her seamstress skills were valued; as a pizza delivery driver, getting to know the pizza-eaters of Horfield and Bedminster; and most significantly as a shop assistant in a bookshop on Park Street. Whilst living in one of her many grotty student flats she got to know an Italian girl who became a firm friend. Later on they cycled together on Caroline's first taste of the pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostela. Caroline played and sang at Giovanna's wedding in Italy a few years afterwards.

Now we must jump ahead a bit. After her degree, Caroline stayed with her Aunt, Rosie (*here today*) who was a lecturer and teacher trainer at International House, the well-known English language school in Hastings. That gave Caroline qualifications to teach abroad. She worked in Holland, and (as we shall see) in Poland. Aha!

Caroline started in Opole, the attractive university town in Silesia. I went there to see her, and was enormously impressed with both her teaching skills and her empathy with the Polish children.

Then she moved to Bielsko Biala. But she didn't know her future husband was there too! She'd ski in the mornings, teach afternoons and evenings.

After Poland it was New Zealand in 2003. There she met a medical man. I think he was an anaesthetist. At any rate she confessed to him that she had been wavering over whether she had been mistaken not to pursue a career in medicine. It's too late now, anyway, she said. He replied: "Not a bit if it! Some of our best clinicians come into the profession later in life." *There's another one sitting here today*: Liam Regan who joined Barts and the London in the same year as Caroline, and now practises as a GP in Dublin.

So the medical seed was sown. But it did not germinate straight away. First there was to be China and then Hong Kong.

Caroline took on the task of setting up a new language school in Shenzhen, across part of the Pearl River Delta from Hong Kong. Her partner in that venture was Jessie Feng.

We met later in her splendid high rise flat. Afterwards Jessie sent a text to Caroline: I RELLY LIKE YOUR DAD. HE IS KIND AND FUNNY AND GENTLEMENT AS WELL. I quite like Jessie!

Caroline taught English to children for two years at the British Council in Hong Kong. Again I saw her at work, exuding enthusiasm and imagination, caring for the children, helping them succeed. Her students were devoted to her. But circumstances combined to move her on. She found the British Council bureaucracy stifling, and started to work as a volunteer in a local hospital. In October 2005, like ET, she phoned home.

“Don’t laugh, I want to be a doctor.”

So now she is. She’s at the ST2 stage of an eight year programme leading we hope and expect to work as a paediatric consultant.

I am inordinately proud of what she has achieved so far, and certain that with her zest for life she will continue to excite, inspire and contribute in whatever path she follows, not only in medicine but also as a wife and mother.

Now I want to return to more recent times. On Thursday 14 May, four weeks ago, I picked up a phone message:

Hi John. It’s Mike, Mike Storey, friend of Caroline’s. How are you? I hope you are well. John, I wondered if you were around today? I’d love to pop over and maybe take you out for a bite to eat; maybe we could do lunch together? Hope to speak to you soon ...

Aha, sounds interesting. Almost immediately afterwards I took a call from **Uncle Richard**, who insisted I tell him asap what this was all about ...

I phoned Mike. We arranged to meet. Mike turned up just before noon, in the rain. So we went out straight away to the Club for a light lunch with a couple of beers. We chatted about this and that, but no mention from Mike about the real reason for his visit. I wondered if I should say something like: “Well, Mike, was there

something you had in mind to say to me?" but didn't. After a while, I mentioned to Mike my hopes for establishing *Explore* on the Island: (Explore is a charity that offers young people the opportunity to question unashamedly an experienced and unknown married couple about long-term relationships, marriage and family).

"So it's all about *marriage* Mike." Still nothing. Eventually, having exhausted the contemplation of rough water on the Solent, Mike proposed we go out into the wind and the rain for some fresh air. Mike had spotted the pier. So we walked along the pier in the wet. We stopped halfway along for a conversation with Dave — the Harbour Commissioners' head of maintenance, engaged in power-washing the deck planks — about the pier's history and the wood it was made of: greenheart for the piles, heavier than water and resistant to gribble worm attack, and opepe for the planking. The rain sprayed; Dave sprayed. At last we left Dave and his spray gun. We reached the end of the pier, waited till two other wet visitors had dispersed, and then at last Mike came out with it: would I give my permission and my blessing for him to marry Caroline. Of course I would

- Shall I get an invitation to the wedding?
- Of course you must come.
- When will it be?
- As soon as possible.
- Maybe in the summer?
- Perhaps in August, no point in hanging about.
- How are Ben and Felix? How long since their mother died?
- Two or three years ...
- How do Ben and Felix get on with Caroline?
- They like Caroline, and enjoyed meeting their new cousins

So that's it then. What a happy development! Over recent weekends Mike and Caroline had taken Felix and Ben camping; first with Anna, Stu, Caleb, Naomi and Judah; then with Dan, Jenny, Katie and Sam. It was reported on both occasions that everyone had enjoyed their time together.

A few days later I heard that Mike and Caroline had asked Ben and Felix how they would feel if their Dad married Caroline. It seems they both clapped their hands at the news, and said they'd like to have a mum again. (*Is this true?*)

Next question: “When should we get married then?” Confident and unwavering response: “As soon as possible — certainly before the end of the month.” So that is why we are all assembled here today.

And that is why I now request and require you all to be upstanding (if you can) and in any case to raise your glasses in a toast to this new family: Caroline, Mike, Ben and Felix.