

The other day I caught a bit of a radio programme about exciting ways to get married. Nearly all of them involved a kind of LSD trip away from reality as we normally live it, followed by a marriage ceremony in some foreign place on the other side of the world. The stranger, the more totally foreign the experience, the better.

You can go to Fiji, we were told, and put garlands of flowers on each other, and arrive in a boat to a secluded beach, and get married under a tent in forty degrees of heat. Or you could have a really “authentic” experience by doing what a lot of Brits now do, and get married in India; you can have a wedding in Sanskrit, where you smear each other in turmeric as a sign of eternal fidelity.

It occurred to me that the word “authentic” seems to have changed its meaning.

There was a footnote that the great thing about most of these weddings is that you can get a very good price at the specialist travel agents who lay it all on for a last-minute impulse wedding. At this one of the presenters said: *If you want a traditional wedding, which costs about £20,000, you need to find some priest who will do it, and he'll require a lot of notice, particularly if it's a Catholic priest, because there's a lot of paperwork.*

In the Gospel today we hear a series of approaches to Jesus by various people, which seem to leave him unimpressed. They deserve our attention, because there's a tendency to make Jesus into a kind of flower-child who makes no demands, and asks for no particular attitude. But this doesn't match the real Jesus we meet in the Gospel. Not all attitudes will do, whether among the disciples, or in those who offer to be disciples.

What makes a disciple unacceptable? We mistake Jesus, I think, because we're waiting for the demand for holiness, and we know that this will disqualify us. But that wasn't his criterion. He'd never have chosen losers like St Peter or crooks like Judas Iscariot if he'd used holiness as the rule. No; but he did ask a willingness to risk, a freedom to leave everything to follow him. Sinners might do that more readily than holy folks with a good name in the community. If you look at the saints, they all have a quality of surrendering self in common. Paradoxically, they become *more* themselves by belonging to Christ; but that's something we know from marriage and family life; the more selfless people are, the more they get to be themselves, and the more we love them.

The great enemy of this liberation of the personality is self-indulgence. Turning our wedding into a celebration of wealth, or a creative form of selfishness, is a good example of our capacity to glorify self instead of celebrating selflessness.

All the great stories of our faith are stories about people letting go of their anxious self-obsession in order to enter into life; Elisha's spectacular response to his new calling is no stunt. It's a wholehearted gift of his life to serve the Word of God. A brilliant image! In the Gospel, the would-be disciples all have conditions they want to couple with their following, and Jesus won't have it. Love can't be divided: it must be the united person who gives the whole life - that's why we grew out of polygamy and found our way to marry. Our culture has to relearn this truth, to find its way back to total self-giving. And our Church must find its way back to the same mystery, and rather quickly, if we are to offer the mystery of Christ to the next generation in Word and Sacrament.