

ST MARK'S CAMBERWELL PERSONAL ETHICS SERMON SERIES

1 May 2011 *Marriage: Just a Piece of Paper?*

Biblical text: Genesis 2:18-25

There has been some political and media discussion recently on the question of the definition of marriage, including the apparently radical suggestion that the state should not even be involved in the regulation of marriage. Controversy for some time about the legal rights of cohabiting couples has led to changes in the law. Many of the former legal advantages of marriage, or disadvantages of other types of cohabiting relationships, have been removed – such as on inheritance and superannuation. But now the discussion has moved to same sex marriage. While the prime minister has affirmed her view that marriage should remain the union of a man and a woman, I doubt we have heard the last of this discussion.

Where should Christians stand on the question of marriage generally? What types of relationship does the Bible endorse as “marriage”. Would the church be better off out of the marriage issue completely? Or is its role in consecrating marriages fundamental to a biblical view of this most intimate of human relationships? Given that the great majority of couples,

including quite a proportion of Christian couples, live together first, and then some marry, is the marriage certificate indeed just a piece of paper? Is it just something for the album along with the photos or DVD of the ceremony and the often very expensive parties – bucks, hens parties and reception – and honeymoon? What does formal, publicly-declared marriage mean that a private understanding between the couple doesn't mean?

Before looking at what scripture has to say about marriage, and getting into some of these questions, it is worth spending a moment on where we are and how we got here. Forgive the history lesson, but I hope it helps put the question into our contemporary context.

Unlike some other countries (particularly in Europe), marriages in Australian churches combine two components. There's a religious ceremony and a civil ceremony (particularly, the signing of the formal documents, including the register). Thus the minister marrying a couple is fulfilling two functions, religious and civil. I'm guessing you didn't know that Greg and Peter are part-time public officials. But only about a third of marriage ceremonies in Australia today are religious. As well as public officials in registry offices, civil celebrants conduct the rest, in all sorts of

places – at reception centres, gardens, and wineries, but sometimes on beaches, even under water, or jumping out of planes.

It won't surprise you that it has not always been like this. Up to the Reformation, a couple merely declared their intention to marry, often without a priest present, and then cohabited. The reformers changed all that. Luther thought the church shouldn't be involved with formalizing marriages at all - they should be a state matter. But Calvin instituted joint state registration and church consecration of marriages in Geneva. As part of the counter reformation, the RC church also required church consecration. Today in many European countries the two ceremonies are separate. Like many matters in England after the Reformation, the situation was more complicated. Then from mid 18C, marriages in a church (or synagogue, etc) were mandated, and from 1837, civil ceremonies were legalized. From this legal heritage the Australian position has developed.

Regardless of how people go into marriage, almost all go into it with high hopes. Here we can see a resonance with the allegorical story in our Genesis reading. Going back to the start of the reading, God recognizes

humanity's need for community and intimacy. In v 18 He says "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner". So God creates and brings all the animals and birds to Adam, who names them.

But after all God's and Adam's effort in this species categorization project, "there was not found a helper as his partner" (v 20b). (Sorry, all you dog lovers, the slogan of a dog being a man's best friend only dates from 1870.) The Hebrew words used here, translated in the NRSV as "a helper as his partner", import "equality", and "corresponding" or "face-to-face". This is definitely not an assistant role; God is looking for an equal partner for Adam. It almost seems from this story that God is trying things out, and finds the animals (including the dog!) inadequate - OK as assistants but not equal partners. So he creates the woman. The feminist joke about God deciding after he made the man, the rough draft, that he should go on to make the female, the finished product, actually has some theological point, in that even in this ideal, pre-fallen world, man on his own is incomplete. (Regarding what this means in this fallen world, including for singles, stick with me till a bit later.)

God brings the woman to Adam, just like the father of the bride, and Adam cries out (v 23): “This at last is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh”. This expression indicates blood relationship and kinship – so marriage creates the same sort of kinship as exists between siblings. Your sibling remains your sibling regardless of events – whether you remain friends or become enemies – and nothing can change it. In this ideal world of the creation story, you are tied to your spouse in kinship for life, just as you are to your brother or sister. This would explain why Jesus speaks so strongly against divorce.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says Adam’s exclamation is a kind of Hebrew code: here at last is a partner who will be with him in times of strength (“bone”) and times of weakness (“flesh”). Or as many of us affirmed in the marriage service, “in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer”. As Brueggemann says, “a relationship is affirmed which is unaffected by changing circumstances. It is a formula of constancy, or abiding loyalty”.

The narrator of the Genesis story then interpolates in v 24 that this ideal man-woman relationship develops in the context of a new, one man/one

woman household, separate from the households of their parents. By this they are stating publicly that they are forming a new human community in which their allegiance is to each other. This is the reason for a marriage ceremony and the party – it is a public declaration and celebration of the establishment of a new family unit based in love, trust and lifelong commitment. So the marriage certificate is much more than a piece of paper – it is a tangible witness to these events, commitments, and solemn but joyous declarations.

V 24 goes on to say that the two become one flesh, so the first mention of marital sex in the Genesis 2 story of creation is in the context of building a new household, mutual support and enjoyment of one another's bodies. Christians historically have often been rather coy about the enjoyment of sex within marriage, probably in part due to the rather ascetic early church fathers, and despite a whole book of the Hebrew Bible – the Song of Solomon – being a celebration of erotic love. Additionally, it is in the other story of creation in Genesis 1 that, the other side of the sexual relationship, procreation, is the focus – “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28). So in the ideal circumstances of God's plan for the man-woman relationship, marital

sex is about enjoyment of one another, mutual bonding and community, as well as procreation.

Despite the view of many researchers that monogamy is culturally conditioned, especially for men, there is also some evidence that hormonally based psychological bonding occurs between couples who engage in intimacy, including sexual intercourse, especially for the woman. So the widespread idea of “trying it out to see if you are compatible” potentially creates a problem if “it doesn’t work out” and you move on to form a sexual relationship with someone else, because your bonding capacity may well have become fragmented. Thus the Biblical ideal of a loving, monogamous relationship probably has a hormonal and psychological as well as a cultural basis as far as the couple’s relationship is concerned. There is, of course, good evidence that it is also the best basis for nurturing children.

This is earthly marriage at its best, and at its best it is a glimpse of heaven, albeit there will not be marriage as we know it in the hereafter. In Ephesians 5:31-32, at the end of Paul’s main treatment of the husband-wife relationship, he describes marriage as a great mystery and compares it

with the relationship between Christ and his church. This indicates that the deep love and submission which Christ showed for the church should characterize the marriage relationship also. Clearly Paul regards marriage as of the highest significance for the earthly Christian community.

But what if marriage hasn't turned out like this? For too many people, marriage has bred miscommunication, resentment, boredom, or worse. For whatever reason, in far too many cases it has ended in separation and divorce. In some, thankfully few but extreme cases, marriage breakdown has led to appalling acts of revenge, as we were reminded recently. And in other cases marriage has continued boringly on, not lovingly and supportively, and hasn't fulfilled the best of the Biblical ideal.

The Hebrew Bible has plenty of examples where marriage has a dark side; here's just two:

- The once-exultant Adam blames his wife for his own sin (Gen 3:13);
- The dreadful four generation saga worthy of a cheap TV miniseries in Genesis 12-50, in which the forebear families of Israel are riddled with marital deception, intrigue, sexual infidelity, jealousy and greed.

We see the dark side of marriage in the New Testament also – Paul seems to assume that marriage in the Ephesian and Colossian churches is troubled, when he calls on husbands to love their wives (and not treat them harshly) and wives to submit to their husbands (Eph 5:22, 25, Col 3:18-19). The asymmetry of these calls upon men and women, especially given the equality of the relationship in the original creation back in Genesis 2 and affirmed by Paul in Galatians 3, simply matches what we all too often expect today from the sad record of the fallen marriages of the Hebrew Bible. We are unsurprised that women often desire to control and manipulate men, and that men often reply by forcibly subjugating women.

As I said in a message last year, it is God's intention of male/female equality at the very start of the Ephesians 5 text – v 21 – where Paul encourages them to be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Indeed, we might say that mutual love and submission are the opposite sides of the same coin of equality. They are the antidotes to these fallen, gender-based tendencies, applicable to both the partners in the marriage.

For those of us who are married, this is a high standard which we often despair of fully achieving. But the knowledge of God's forgiveness is the

hope that sustains us in the endeavour. It makes us realize that a “successful” marriage is only partly due to our effort – it is also due to God’s grace (what our secular friends might call good luck). For those of us in painful or unfulfilling marriages, a deep recognition of God’s grace can help us more than just survive. It can help us live authentic Christian lives in tough circumstances. And for those of us who have been married, but where human frailty has led to public breakdown and exposure of private pain, we have learnt some bitter lessons. And if we have remarried God’s grace and forgiveness plus that deeper knowledge of ourselves can give us a genuine hope of more closely reaching toward that standard on a second attempt. (I’ll say no more here - Greg is preaching on divorce next week.)

There is much the church can and should do to support marriages – pre-marriage courses, marriage enrichment courses, individual, small group and pastoral care support of marrieds, not just those with problems, and when needed professional counseling. Christian marriages should be a real witness in a deeply broken world.

Understandably, perhaps, given my Genesis 2 text, I’ve focused so far on marriage. But what does this text have to say to those of us who are

single, for whatever reason, whether by choice, calling or circumstance? Pretty clearly, the Biblical teaching is that sexual wholeness is found in either faithful monogamous marriage between a man and a woman, or chaste singleness. How are we, particularly single people, to live with this?

In our highly sexualized Western world, this is not fashionable, but it's not fashionable teaching in many other cultures also. For example if I live in a culture where my identity as a man is formed by my production of male heirs (and there are plenty of contemporary societies and sub-cultures like this), I can discover instead that a chaste life of singleness is thinkable, liveable and honourable. This is because my true identity is known by God, and, even in my disappointment, my truest family can emerge when I meet and engage lovingly with brothers and sisters in Christ's kingdom. I don't need to obsess about wives, reproduction, and the family name. Or if I do marry, but as a couple we remain childless, then amidst our grief we can yet discover that we no longer need to grieve the loss of family and continuation of the family name. Being "in Christ" can change all that, but it deeply challenges us as a church community to truly support one another.

And our culture has another take on human identity – our sexual thoughts, feelings and experiences are essential to our human identity. If we are forty or fifty year old virgins, we are somehow incomplete. If we have sexual yearnings that are not met, then our lives have not been fully lived – our sexual yearnings are interpreted to mean we are like machines that “needs” sex, just like a car “needs” petrol. Marriages are automatically threatened if there is any sexual shortcoming. Singleness is necessarily incomplete, and the absence of sexual frustration somehow becomes odd. Friendships are confusing, for at the first sign of intimacy, we wonder if the friendship should therefore find sexual expression.

Now for succinctness I have probably oversimplified this “sexualism”, but I don’t think we can deny that this thinking undergirds much interpretation of our world. Into this scene appears the gospel, which surprisingly declares that we can “find ourselves”, not in sexual essentialism, but in Christ. Our sexuality can be lived in the chaste singleness lived out by the man Jesus Christ, or in the faithful lifelong marriages he affirmed.

The church should be a community of people seeking to discover sexual wholeness in the practices of chaste singleness and faithful marriage. We

must not pretend that it is straightforward or easy, and we must not demonize those who fall short. Indeed we have all fallen short, and it is in our arrogance and sinfulness that we ascribe degrees of shortfall. The “sexualism” we all carry as part of being in our culture, means that sometimes it is simply difficult to believe that Christ’s way is thinkable. Sexual feelings can seem like the final truth. Yet we can also find ourselves surrounded by men and women who are forging loving, contented marriages, and single people who are learning the art of a network of intimate, supportive, non-sexualized friendships.

And yet, alongside this vision of sexual wholeness, the church particularly and we as individual Christians as well, must not be naïve about sexual brokenness and fallenness. In particular we must ensure good structures are in place for dealing with breaches of fidelity and power with a sexual element – issues the church continues to deal with very painfully.

The church can and should do its part to support people, whether married or single, in living authentic Christian lives. I’ve already touched on support for married people, and there are corresponding but different strategies for supporting singles, including especially those drawn to the same sex.

What we must avoid is any tendency to coyness or avoidance in dealing with these most fundamental issues of who we are as people, living as we do in a culture which has taken our God-given sexuality and in significant part seeks to make it a matter of private indulgence and economic exploitation.