

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 5th October 2003

Genesis 2:18-24; Hebrews 1:1-4 and 2:9-11; Mark 10:2-16

Two of today's readings speak about bonds of love – as in marriage. But we are here today because of another bond of love – that between God and ourselves. However strong or weak we perceive that bond to be, it has brought us here. As with all other bonds of relationship, this is a bond sometimes under threat, sometimes pursued with difficulty, and sometimes ignored with apathy, or damaged by sin.

Lord: Strengthen the bonds that exist between us, your friends and disciples, And give us grace to be faithful to you. Amen.

Our Old Testament reading for the day from Genesis speaks about God making man and woman – made for each other, and when joined in a bond (which we refer to as marriage), it means they are joined as one. Our New Testament reading from the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that Jesus, by entering fully into human life and experiencing the suffering of death, became a brother and saviour to all people. In the Gospel reading, through the words of Jesus we are again taught about the bonds of marriage, and in those words Jesus quotes the statement from Genesis that we heard in our first reading. It is on the OT and NT readings that I will focus my sermon this morning.

I left the readings as they are in our lectionary – they provide for a cycle of readings through the year that cover all the Bible's themes and avoid a preacher continually focusing on his or her "hobby horse" and also ensure we do not skip over tough portions of the Bible. Today is a case in point.

Care and compassion are needed in talking about marriage or divorce. My notes would show that they have been rewritten several times, leaving bits out and adding bits in. This needs several sermons and my original notes also included points on sexuality, which is integral to some of what we're looking at, but it would have made it too long. Inevitably I will leave out many aspects that could be covered.

However I hope to say something of relevance to everyone

- Whether this field has brought you sheer bliss and joy, or deep hurt and pain,
- Whether you are single, or married with six kids,
- Or a grandparent anxiously watching younger generations cope with modern living.

I aim to do the following:

- To remind us of scriptural values relating to these subjects,
- To help us relate these to modern circumstances, & to the pain of many people,
- To sketch a broad outline of ways in which to handle these issues.

In one sermon I cannot do more than highlight a few major points. Further reading or discussion may be required, and in this regard I want to highlight 2 books:

Richard Foster: "Money, Sex & Power"

Bishop Frank Retief: "Divorce: Hope for the Hurting"

Both are locally available, and in my library, along with many other books in the libraries of the parish and the clergy, which we are happy to lend out.

Marriage carries huge potential for positive and negative experience. The church often addresses it through counselling, in dealing with hurt and pain in people's lives, as well as in marriage preparation, and in the joy and celebration of marriage.

Our Anglican Prayer Book Marriage Service carefully expresses the purposes of marriage, as widely understood in the Christian faith. Despite popular secular theories or even the opinions of some in religious circles, there is no room within the Christian faith for a tradition of marriage in which one partner dominates the other. Hence this is reflected in our marriage service, in which the couple make mutual promises and in which marriage is understood as a partnership of equal responsibility. A couple may choose to share that responsibility in different functions – and for every couple in the world, there is a unique experience of marriage, in terms of the internal dynamics of that relationship. A couple may choose to express their marriage in roles traditional or contemporary, but each bears equal responsibility for the other, and for keeping of the marriage vows.

This is expressed in a (rather kitsch) saying I sometimes use in a wedding service, based on the account of Adam finding no suitable helpmate from amongst God's creatures, and God taking a rib out of Adam to form Eve:

God didn't make Eve out of Adam's head, that he might dominate her,
Nor from his feet, that she might trample him,
...Nor even from his neck, that she might be a pain!
Instead he took her from his side,
That she may be a companion alongside him!

The Prayer Book service, based on Scripture, also reminds us that marriage is a gift of God, in which husband and wife become "one flesh". That is more than simply a polite reference to marital sexual intercourse – it emphasizes a spiritual and emotional joining of two lives, the deepest and most profound bond between two people.

For this reason, marriage is regarded as sacramental – a physical expression of God in our lives, in that a couple's love for one another is intended as a sign of Christ's love for his Church and of his uniting us to himself.

The Marriage Service continues, saying: "This union of heart, mind and body is given

- For mutual help and comfort in prosperity and adversity
- That they may know each other with delight and tenderness in acts of love
- That they may have children and bring them up in the knowledge and love of the Lord.”

A high calling indeed! One which, especially as far as the husband is concerned, St. Paul likens to the intentional, sacrificial love Christ showed his church, if you will read Ephesians 5: 21-33. (You must read from verse 21, despite the paragraph headings usually found in bibles, from verse 22.) Verse 21 says: Be subject to one another, out of reverence for Christ...” and then continues delineating aspects of husband’s and wives responsibilities towards one another. (Elaborate, time permitting.)

We may look at a newly married couple, commenting on how ideally suited to each other they are, and that it is “a marriage made in heaven”, but like everything else it requires considerable work and commitment to be anything approaching the high calling of God, and to reap the blessings he intended from the beginning. Busy lives, pressures and social expectations sometimes make that hard to do... (Comment on proliferation of books / courses like those of Stephen Covey – a hunger for help in making time for the values and priorities of our lives.)

All of this is expressed early in our knowledge of God; the book Genesis made clear that man needed companionship, and was not designed to be sufficient unto himself.

We are told that, instead of remaining under the protective custody of parents, a man leaves them and establishes a new family unit with a woman who has undergone the same leaving process. The God-designed intention is that they form an inseparable union, of which “one flesh” is both a sign and an expression. Jesus reaffirmed this in his teaching on marriage and divorce, part of which was read for us today.

We live in a world in which fewer and fewer people choose to shape their lives by the values of God’s Kingdom. But many are also unaware of these values, or are angry and cynical as a result of hypocrisy they have encountered in their families or society or in some members of the church.

Sometimes people are hurt or scarred, and without healing and help they are unable to live by God’s values. Until healed, they will likely continue being hurt and inflicting their pain on their partners and families. Great sensitivity and caring is needed. Clergy and counsellors need prayer and support, that in our ministries we may exercise the love of Jesus, and never multiply the pain.

The Christian community is required to minister to all – which need not imply acceptance of another’s morals, but a need to reach out to those who might otherwise be considered outcasts or sinners or whatever other label one chooses.

Whilst not avoiding tough issues, Scripture tells us that we need to be slow to condemn, quick to love and forgive. The same Jesus who made his tough pronouncement on divorce, also dealt with a prostitute with deep compassion; so too,

the Samaritan woman 5-times-married-and-now-with-another. There was an injunction to sin no more, but his compassion was in contrast to the religiously self-righteous who felt entitled to stone them!

The church often deals with the broken-ness of people, esp. in these areas, where we have high hopes and ideals, alongside the full range of human frailties. And the Church faces dilemmas in its desire to be biblically faithful, including being loving towards those who have not been perfect – that includes all of us, so none of us is in a place to condemn, or proudly proclaim our righteousness!

We try seriously to take people “where they are at” (not where we think they ought to be) and help them to know God’s love in the midst of their situation, to confess and repent where this is required, and to grow in loving relationship with Jesus so that living by his values becomes natural rather than imposed. And this applies to every area of life – may we not make a common mistake of seeing sexuality and marriage relationships as the single area of sinfulness.

Divorce could be a separate subject, and it is hard to make only a few points. Suffice at this stage to say that in my younger, moralistic days, I regarded divorce as an absolute “no-no”, seeing all things in life as clear-cut – but that’s the typical immature response of youth.

It has been a privilege to oversee counselling in which a marriage is restored after serious problems or breakdown. I have had the privilege of re-marrying a couple who, two years earlier, had divorced each other but had since worked through their problems.

Divorce is sometimes absolutely necessary, when the marriage has truly broken down with no possibility of reconciliation, or as a result of continuous emotional or physical or sexual abuse. There is no requirement that a person endure a marriage that is a travesty of the glorious biblical image of it.

Divorce is not considered a Godly thing. Yet all sin is forgivable, and it is out of this understanding that the Anglican Church and others have changed their positions regarding divorce. (I am aware that among us today will be people who were divorced and then remarried in the time when this could not take place in the church; some still carry pain because of that.) The approach to it all is primarily pastoral and spiritual, not bureaucratic: We try to ascertain that there is no possibility of the former relationship being reconciled, that responsibilities towards a former spouse or children are being honoured, and that the causes of the previous marital breakdown is acknowledged and dealt with.

All this is an attempt to be biblically faithful, both to values of marriage, and to pastoral concerns echoed even by secular counselling agencies that people sometimes go from one failed marriage into another with the same problems; we obviously want to avoid that, and ensure that a couple entering a new permanent relationship and making vows before God are in a good place to do so, unencumbered by past baggage. This is especially the case when the person re-marrying was subject to abuse or infidelity, and it is wonderful often to note the healing nature of the new relationship.

For we need to note that divorce is not spoken against by a finger-wagging God saying “you naughty people”, but because when you join two people as one, and that bond breaks, it causes profound damage to the persons involved... and to many others around them too. We are talking of a separation of the most profound bond between two people – such bonds cannot be cleanly broken! We are not discussing neatly cutting a piece of toast, leaving equal amounts of jam on both sides with no mess spilling over!

It is also wonderful to see the Christian community being less self-righteous and uncompromising in its rules as it sometimes was. This applies also to single parents, whether married before or not, being welcomed as full members of the community with as much right to love and acceptance and dignity as anyone else. It is sad that in our society still, divorced people, single people and single parents sometimes find themselves socially excluded, but there is no place within the church for such attitudes or practices.

Christian people need to make their own informed choices in the light of their faith. The Church’s role is to help us do so, which includes strengthening faith, informing people about God’s intentions, and making it clear that if we choose to ignore God, we are likely to miss out on the best which life has to offer, and probably suffer hurt in the process!

Thank God for marriage – God is the original Designer!

I shall close with a few sentences from a Christian commentator, Flor McCarthy:

The ability to love is not something that happens to a couple on their wedding day with all the other gifts. Love is something that has to be learned. The real journey married couples have to make – and single persons as well – is the journey from selfishness to love.

Nothing is a greater challenge to love; nothing provides a greater opportunity for growth in it, than marriage.