

# MARRIAGE IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

As presented by Adrian Thatcher  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights on October 3, 2009

## (2) APPLICATIONS

### 1. "MARITAL VALUES"

In our first session we grounded Christian marriage in the doctrines of God, of Christ, and of the Eucharist. Now for the applications. Let's make an important distinction between marriage as a legal, social and religious institution, and marriage as an arrangement that embodies certain *values*, values for the sake of which it is upheld as an institution and held in esteem both by Church and State. It is important to ask *all* Christian defenders of marriage why marriage is so important to them, especially when the New Testament is ambivalent about it. One answer is that in marriage, at its best, a woman and a man pledge to love one another as Christ loves the church and gave himself up for her as his bride. (Eph.5:25-33). Another answer is that the new covenant between God and God's people, sealed by the giving of the life of Christ, his blood, for us, (Mk.14:24; Mt.26:28) and acknowledged at every eucharistic celebration, is also instantiated, and finitely enacted in the life-course of a marriage. Another answer is that marriage is a sacramental partnership of equals, and yet another is that the married couple and any children they have form a "communion of persons" who may finitely embody the infinite Communion of Persons that God is.

These "thick" theological descriptions of marriage presume that there are particular values lived out in this iconic relationship which justify the remarkable language used. What are they? Surely they would be thought to include deepening love, life-long fidelity, and mutual commitment - "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; according to God's holy law." (Common Worship: 2006) Let us call these values "marital values."

Now it is very clear that some marriages are lacking in marital values, and some non-marital relationships possess them. Marriage then, as an institution, is no guarantor of the provision of marital values (anymore than the valid administration of a sacrament is the guarantor of faith in its recipients). Rowan Williams has rightly decried "the insistence on a fantasy version of heterosexual marriage as the solitary ideal, when the facts of the situation are that an enormous of 'sanctioned' unions are a framework for violence and human destructiveness on a disturbing scale." Sexual union, he declares, "is not delivered from moral danger and ambiguity by satisfying a formal socioreligious criterion." (Williams, 2002:16) Wherever marital values are found churches should commend and name them, drawing the holders of them towards the self-giving source of all values, revelling in the prevenient grace of God among the millions of men and women who may still be ignorant of any Christian teaching about marriage, but manifesting it nonetheless.

## ***2. MARITAL VALUES AND ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY***

A first step for this age-group is to acknowledge the Church's pastoral failure. For most of Christian history, betrothal was allowed at 7; girls were regularly married at 12, and less often, boys married at 14. In Britain the average age of first marriage for males is 31, and 29 for females (and the USA is catching up fast). There is now about 17 years of adolescence and young adulthood between puberty and marriage. The gap is unprecedented. All the old boundaries that kept adolescents apart (single-sex schools and College halls of residence: elaborate courtship procedures; chaperoned dating, etc.) have been swept away. The culture assumes and encourages instant gratification (and has forgotten the character-

forming virtues of patience and hope). Endless titillation confronts us even when we are not looking for it, and above all the availability of a range of reliable contraceptives has fundamentally changed the meanings of sexual activity, and lowered (but not eliminated) the possibility of pregnancy. In the face of all this, the churches have not generally found a comfortable language for talking about sex, nor have they managed to sound positive about the spiritual value of learning to love.

From a respectable transatlantic distance it also seems that Abstinence Education is an inadequate answer. It is certainly a counter-cultural response to sexual chaos, and many adolescents have delayed sexual activity because of it. But there are important empirical questions about whether it works, what happens to Promise Keepers the strength of whose desires does not permit them to keep their promises, and also about the message AE gives. There is a lot more to sexual experience than penetrative heterosexual intercourse. It is a mistake to assume, as both our societies officially do, that marriages begin with weddings, and so there is a "before" period when having sex is wrong and an "after" period when it is OK. It is also a worry that couples who are successfully abstinent are still not prepared for marriage, and may have a fearful and evasive attitude to sex when at last they get there.

Once again, theology can come to our aid. First of all the virtue of chastity remains as important as it ever was. Chastity is not the same as *celibacy*, or *abstinence*, even though some chaste people choose abstinence as its appropriate form. Chastity is the exercise of appropriate restraint in the relations one has. The Catholic Catechism says "All Christ's faithful are called to lead a chaste life *in keeping with their particular states of life*." (1994: 502 para.2348) But there are several "states of life." Married couples are required to be chaste. That means they cannot have sexual relations with anyone but their partners. That is the

restraint to which they voluntarily subscribe. Chastity for people who are not heterosexual, fertile and unmarried may mean abstaining from full sexual relations with a loved one until both are ready for mutual commitment to one another, and to any children the couple might have. *The Churches need to make chastity more sexy!* Responsible restraint is the key to wise conduct.

God is Love, and to be made in the image of God is to be made to love. The Christian life is about *learning to become lovers*, and for most of us this includes having a partner to love physically and spiritually. The precious years before the exclusive commitment of marriage, should it happen, provide a learning experience which is capable of preparing us for marriage (if in fact we do). There are some principles to observe. There are many activities apart from full intercourse that can be enjoyed, and, as the 1991 Anglican Bishops' report *Issues in Human Sexuality* says, "the greater the degree of personal intimacy, the greater should be the degree of personal commitment." (1991: 19) It can never be good for a child to be brought into the world unwanted by his or her parents, so a rule for straight people might be "Don't have full sex with any partner with whom you would not both have a child." Another principle that runs counter-culturally is to honour our bodies (Paul called them "the temple of Holy Spirit" - 1 Cor.6:19). The Spirit within us is hurt if we cheaply give ourselves away.

### **3. MARITAL VALUES AND COHABITATION**

About 70% of marrying couples live together first. The more worrying statistic is the number of cohabitators who exit cohabitation back into singleness, sometimes pregnant or as a new and single parent. All cohabitators are not the same! A basic distinction is to be made between *non-nuptial* and *pre-nuptial* cohabitators. The first live together without reference to marriage or as a way of avoiding it: the second intend to proceed to their nuptials, i.e., to become married later on. This

second group shows remarkable similarities to Christians marrying in early times, right down to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In biblical times people entered marriage via betrothal. (Thatcher: 2002) There are five examples: Rebecca and Isaac; Rachel and Jacob; Zipporah and Moses; Sarah and Tobias; and Mary and Joseph. Marriage liturgies presume two occasions, each marked by appropriate rites and social events. The first is the *spousals* which was called the *matrimonium initiatum* or the beginning of marriage. This constituted the intention to enter, at a future time, an irrevocable and permanent pledge of union. It was marriage initiated, just like that of Mary and Joseph. It was a conditional promise rendered unconditional by the forthcoming *nuptials* or solemnization of the marriage. Promises were made in the future tense - *de futuro*. Sexual intercourse, or the marriage liturgy (whichever came first!) rendered the conditional promise unconditional. At the nuptials vows were made in the present tense - *de praesenti*. This was *matrimonium ratum*. Aquinas is clear that betrothal vows were dissoluble. (*Summa Theologica, Part 3 (Supp.)*, q.43.art.3.) One ground of dissolution is mutual consent (so if the couple go off each other, no harm is done!). So there are two stages in the entry into pre-modern marriage. The Latin expresses it well. The beginning of marriage is *matrimonium initiatum*. If a couple then started having sex before the solemnization they were presumed fully married (*matrimonium presumptum*). When they solemnized their marriage in church, it was then a ratified marriage (*matrimonium ratum*). Full sexual experience was regarded as consummation (*matrimonium consummatum*).

An "archaeological" reading of the *Common Worship Marriage Service* of the Church of England reveals a fragment of the old betrothal vows of the first millennium. Most marriage liturgies have similar vows. The bride and bridegroom are each asked *two* sequential questions. These are: to the bridegroom, "N, will you take N to be your wife? Will you love her, comfort her, honour and protect her,

and, forsaking all others, be faithful to her as long as you both shall live?": and, to the bride, "N, will you take N to be your husband? Will you love him, comfort him, honour and protect him, and, forsaking all others, be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?" The answer is "I will", and then in words of the present tense each of them performatively "takes" the other with the words "I take you to be my wife" or husband. It may be doubted whether many clergy and marrying couples are aware that the future tense of the question "Will you take...?" and the future tense of the response "I will" is a tangible relic of the first millennium, when the vows, or *weds*, or *troths* were exchanged by the *betrotthed* in anticipation of their nuptial ceremony sometime in the future. The future and present tense questions retain a "trace" of the two-stage entry into marriage of another age..

I would like to see a betrothal rite restored, and I don't expect it to happen. Young people may be suffering from a liturgical famine, and a rite which set forth in the presence of God their hopes for growing love and commitment into a permanent marriage would be valuable, though probably irretrievable. But we can *imagine it*. Once the betrothal rite is restored, the present marriage service would also be restored, *de facto*, to its previous position in the couple's life-history, as a *culmination of a process* rather than a *singular event* licensing talk of "before" and "after" a marriage. The "Solemnization of Matrimony" as the Book of Common Prayer names the Marriage Service, restores the supposition that a marriage already exists, and that it has now reached the point when it is solemnized, of unconditional promise which requires the blessing of God and continuing divine grace to sustain it.

A huge pastoral advantage of the double rite is that the passage from singleness to marriage is marked in the couple's story. Once betrothed they are no longer single. They are beginning marriage, but the unconditional commitment which marriage assumes has precisely not yet been required of them by the Church, by

their families and friends, or by each other. They grow into this as men and women grow into their vocations as monks and nuns, leaving final vows to the consummation of a long process. Their growing commitment and sexual love could then be seen as blessed with the spiritual grace of the sacrament of marriage instead of being regarded as "living in sin," or evoking overt or covert disapproval.

The right pastoral approach to the increasing number of Christian couples who live together before marriage is to thank God for the marital values their togetherness already expresses, and to guide them to the solemnization and deepening of those values in the sacrament of Christian marriage. Expressions of disapproval, accusations of living in sin, insistence even on domestic separation prior to the wedding (what could be more daft?) are pointless and destructive, themselves a sin against the prevenient grace that is bringing the couple to a lifelong commitment. Increasingly unmarried couples are bringing their children to church for baptism. With appropriate counselling for the parents, priests are wholly right to baptize these children, and to express the joyful solidarity of the church with the demanding tasks facing young parents.

#### ***4. MARITAL VALUES AND SAME-SEX COUPLES***

That marital values exist in the case of many thousands of lesbian and gay couples is undeniable. I have long argued elsewhere that the case for extending the rite and the right of marriage to couples of the same sex is overwhelming. (Thatcher, 1999: 294-302) (That is not to say, of course, that all lesbian and gay couples want, or ought, to marry). If they promise to try to love one another as Christ loves the church, then marital values are present. Thank God that there are many people of the same sex who desire to promise themselves to each other in this way! It is difficult to understand what the problem is! Can same-sex couples make covenants? Of course they can! Are they "reciprocal," made between "co-

equal partners?" They generally are. Can such unions be "paradigms of kenotic love?" Can same-sex couples share in the *communion of love* that God already is? Who said God was straight?! It is sad that out of deference to Christian teaching the registration of civil partnerships by same sex couples throughout the United Kingdom is not permitted in religious premises. That drives a further wedge between the recognition of marital values and the very institution that solemnizes, encourages and supports marriage.

I have not been asked to address the question of gender directly, but I do so briefly here in order to make use of the latest scholarship about gender in the ancient world which throws a whole new light on same-sex relations and biblical attitudes towards them. Men were assumed to have the masculine quality of "hardness." (*duritia, robur*) This was not wholly a phallic characteristic. It "referred to the muscularity of the ideal male body; it also symbolized the moral uprightness and self-discipline that men were presumed to embody." (Kuefler, 2001: 21) The opposite quality assigned to women was "softness" or "delicateness" (*mollitia*) which "represented not only their delicate bodies, but also their love of luxury, the languor of their minds, the ease with which they gave themselves to their emotions, and their dissolute morals." (21)

The hardness of men marked not only their moral austerity but also their role as sexual penetrators and sexual aggressors. In a complimentary (*sic*) way, the *mollitia* or softness of women denoted their role as sexually penetrated, and beyond that, the passive role they were expected to play not only in sexual relations but also in society generally. (22)

The term "spectrum" expresses well the elevation of men over women. Diana Swancutt explains

...ancients did not conceive of the people assigned to the ends of the spectrum as referring to two genetically differentiated sexes, male, and female. Rather, ancients constructed the human physique on a one-body, multigendered model with the perfect body deemed 'male/man'. (2003: 197)

Greek and Roman men were thought to embody "physical and political strength, rationality, spirituality, superiority, activity, dryness, and penetration." Women were thought to embody the negative qualities of "physical and political weakness, irrationality, fleshliness, inferiority, passivity, wetness, and being penetrated." (198) Swancutt stresses that these "opposite" qualities do not at all reflect two opposite sexes. Rather,

...because all bodies were thought to contain more- (masculine) and less-perfect (feminine) elements that required constant maintenance to produce the perfect male/masculine body, females/women and the other gendered beings (e.g., androgynes, *kinaidoi* [effeminates], and *tribades* [dominatrices]) were deemed differently imperfect versions of the male body, versions whose imperfections (e.g., breasts, fat, menstruation, weak sperm, inverted internal penises) were manifestations of their impaired physiological health. (198)

Elite men, Swancutt says (in a more recent essay) were defined as "hard, rational penetrators" at the top of the social ladder, while "Women occupied its lowest rungs because they were soft, leaky, and wild - the least perfect male-bodies, their vaginas deemed undescended penises." (Swancutt, 2006:71)

Heat, hardness, and perfection, then, were key marks of masculinity. Men were ranked higher than women, and women, as Colleen Conway explains, belonged with slaves and animals in the requirement of submission to male authority:

...slaves, too, were like animals, women, and foreigners insofar as they lived lives of submission. In short, understanding what it meant to be a man in the Greco-Roman world meant understanding one's place in a rationally ordered cosmos in which free men were placed at the top and what fell beneath could all be classified as "unmen." (2008: 15)

It was understood "quite literally that one must be the actor, rather than one acted upon." "...to be active often involved expressing one's dominion over another. To be passive meant to submit to this domination." (Conway, 22, 36) Finally, the gender spectrum was seen as a terrifying gradient - "the gender gradient" (50) - down which men could readily slide. There was a slippery slope to be avoided, from

masculinity, through effeminacy, to femininity. Men were haunted by the question "If women were not different in kind, but simply a lesser, incomplete version of men, what was there to keep men from sliding down the axis into the female realm?" (18)

Manhood involved constant recognition in public and private behaviour, since it was "not a state to be definitely achieved but something always under construction and constantly open to scrutiny." (Gleason, 1995: xxii) Evidence for the gender slide could be found not simply in the ambiguous bodies of intersex or hermaphroditic people, but in lapses in the routine behaviour of dominating males. In a similar way active, aggressive or "butch" behaviour among women led to the accusation that they were attempting to elevate themselves above their social status by becoming men.

I have outlined the gender theory that is current in advanced research in Classics. I have done so in order to understand in what the apparent prohibition of same-sex relations consisted. It was understood that if men had sex with men one of them would be passive and so would necessarily abandon his role of being a man. If women had sex with women, it was thought that one of them was necessarily active and so guilty of the crime of acting like a man. In each case, they jeopardized their place in a gender hierarchy.

Awareness of this gender hierarchy is an effective means of dissipating homophobic expectations within the biblical text. We just don't believe in it any more! We don't think of men as active, women as passive: men as brainy, women as brainless; men as controlling, women as controlled. We believe that "in Christ there is neither male nor female." (Gal.3:28) Since we don't accept ancient gender theories we need not worry about transgressions of them. In any case we have a

higher, Christian morality. It is based on sharing in God's love, making covenants, being faithful, mutual, and so on.

## **5. MARITAL VALUES AND POST-MARRIED PEOPLE**

There has been much discussion of the pastoral maltreatment by the churches of divorced people. It was only in 2003 that what the Church of England calls "further marriages" became canonically licit, whereas many Protestant Churches have never had a problem with divorce. For some of these people a second marriage may be desirable, whether or not a church can be found to recognise or solemnise it. But what do the churches say to those countless postmarried people who do not wish to marry again? If they commence sexual activity, are they technically "fornicators" having sex outside marriage instead of before it?

In such cases the Churches have a huge opportunity to demonstrate pastoral understanding. Married people, we may assume, lack the gift of celibacy. They may be wary of marrying again, at least in the immediate future, and if they are recovering from hurt and trauma they are uniquely vulnerable to predatory approaches from potential lovers. I suggest that some of these people may simply enjoy *release* from the norm of marriage, or that, in their case the norm be temporarily *suspended*. Relationships involving cohabitation or semi-cohabitation ("living apart together") may well be appropriate in this stage of life. Reduced commitment to a new sexual partner (say after bereavement or abandonment by a former spouse) may enable healing and further self-knowledge to take place before plunging into a new marriage. The temporary nature of such arrangements will ensure that the marital norm is not impugned, and if conception is possible, commitment to children should be firm.

## **6. MARITAL VALUES WITHIN THE SINGLE LIFE**

Finally, what have marital values to do with the single life? Churches should not expect single people to marry. If marriage is a definite *vocation*, then there will be plenty of people not called to it. That is how I understand the conversation between Jesus and his disciples at Matthew 19:10-11. After Jesus outlines his teaching his disciples say, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry." Right on. Paul warns us of the distractions of marriage. Single people may have more friendships, and time to nurture them, more demanding careers, and more independent lives which free them for the love of neighbours and the service of others.

But what of single people who want to marry? Keep looking! But don't be misled by the thick descriptions of marriage heard today! We are all made for love: all fitted for *communion*, but that communion need not be marriage. Can a person be single, a Christian, and sexually active? Sometimes our sexual energies can be channelled into other activities, but I suspect not for long. We should not think that all sexual activity ends up with penetration or being penetrated. If it does, Christian teaching is that the body language of love is most truthful when it expresses deep commitment, of which marriage remains the formal expression.

## **7. AN INCLUSIVE THEOLOGY, AND AN INCLUSIVE PRACTICE**

I have tried in these two sessions to make a case for liberal attitudes which are not based on secular values but on deep Christian convictions, on the retrieval of past Christian practice, and on a reading of Christian doctrines that do not do violence to them, but rather restate them in the light of a developing Tradition and serious pastoral needs. I hope you will think it is an inclusive theology and an

inclusive practice. An inclusive theology seeks open dialogue with its opponents, especially evangelical Christians who pronounce their communion with us "impaired" because of our beliefs. All we can do is set forth arguments, clearly and charitably, seeking the help of the Spirit who promises to lead us into all the truth. The idea of marital values is an attempt to provide an inclusive practice which does not marginalise that half of adult humankind which is unmarried, but not necessarily celibate either. I look forward to your questions.

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