

Biblical Models of Marriage: 'to ask and imagine'

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“Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God in the Church and in Christ Jesus, for ever and ever. Amen” - Ephesians 3.20,21

When first asked to speak on the Biblical understanding of marriage, I reminded Archbishop David that I am the only intentionally celibate member of the House of Bishops. He replied that the Roman Catholic clergy always say that the referee has the best view of the game.

It is of course their defence for a celibate hierarchy making decisions about what is right and wrong within marriage. But I need to say that I come to this topic as neither a referee nor a judge. I come to offer what I believe I have discovered about marriage in Scripture.

In order to do that I think we need to ask two foundational questions:

First of all, acknowledging that sexuality is intrinsic to being human, I think we need to start by asking what does the Christian tradition claim human beings are created to be and to do?

In addition to that most important question, I think we need to ask a second, more specific question about marriage: Why we are convinced who marries who matters so much?

So, even before I begin to speak about marriage, let me let me return to what we understand about human beings in the sight of God.

The creation stories in Genesis are very clear that human beings are the pinnacle of creation. The creation of humans is 'very good' in the eyes of God. The stories and teachings of the Old and New Testaments tell us that human beings are different or distinct from the rest of creation, because human beings live lives of worship and adoration.

In short it is our purpose to consciously give glory to God. This is a 24/7 calling and it is meant to be life giving and uplifting. The Westminster Catechism asks: “What is the chief end of man?” The answer is: “To know God and enjoy him for ever.”

Of course we know there are many people who neither know nor do this and yet manage to live their life reasonably well. But we believe that there is something in our spiritual DNA that makes us most alive when we are in touch with our Creator and Redeemer, and so we seek to live lives that are sanctified.

To quote Irenaeus, “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.” And to be fully alive one needs to give God all that God is worth. Consequently, worship (worth-ship) is what you are I are made for. Think if you will, of the Sursum Corda within the Eucharistic Great Thanksgiving: “Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord.”

Symbol of a divine covenant

So as I proceed to talk about marriage as it is found in the Bible, I am assuming we want a model of marriage that helps people become their best selves. Also I suggest to you that the life is best for

you and me is a life that honours and gives glory to the God we love. “We love because God first loved us.” states 1 John 4.19, so the love we show one another is meant to be a reflection of the Divine love of the Holy Trinity, a love that is generous and gracious. It is the love we meet in Jesus.

But let’s get back to Biblical models of marriage. I want to remind us that marriage in Scripture is more than a covenant between two people. It is also the symbol of something greater. Marriage mirrors the covenant between Christ and the Church. In the Old Testament, marriage is the symbol of the covenant between God and Israel.

Let me just go back for a moment here. When we speak about lives of worship, I do not mean singing praise songs or going to church services per se. Worship is about the orientation of our lives (ie the orientation of our whole being). Worship is the focus of our life at the deepest level. It is like the sunflower that follows the sun all day long. It is the recognition of what is responsible for our true self.

However, there is freedom and it is as persons who are free that we decide whether we will worship the Holy Trinity or power; whether we will orient ourselves towards God or violence; whether we will seek to grow into the person God created us to be or whether we will seek to become a money making machine. It is up to each of us to decide whether we will live lives that are God-facing and serving, or lives that are self-facing and self-serving.

This paper assumes that essential to human living is worship and the intention at the deepest level to love and serve God. If you don’t agree, then I invite you to ask yourself what you think is the primary reason human being exists.

The marriage service in The Book of Common Prayer, which is the basis of all Anglican prayer and liturgy, had historically one vow made in the service of holy matrimony, which speaks of worship: “With my body, I thee worship.” In the words of NT Wright, “the word worship means literally, ‘worth-ship’: to accord worth, true value, to something, to recognize and respect it for the true worth it has.”

NT Wright, a former Bishop of Durham, goes on to say that we may begin by admiring something beautiful or someone who is beautiful, but all beauty, personal, internal or external, physical or spiritual, in an art gallery, on the beach or across the table of a restaurant, is meant to be a step on the journey to better seeing and recognizing the beauty and worth of the God of love.

So when we worship another person with our body, that human relationship becomes one step in our relationship with God through Christ in the power of the Spirit. True love leads us towards God and finding ourselves in the presence of God causes our lives to blossom and bear fruit.

Different understandings

Sometimes in recent years we hear talk of ‘Christian marriage’. But the Common Life Liturgical Commission of the Province explains that there is no such thing as ‘Christian marriage’, only the marriage of Christians. But even then one does ponder the need for certain distinctions. So for the purpose of this paper I suggest to you that while there is not ‘Christian marriage’ per se, there are many different understandings of marriage at work in our world.

As you know from television and perhaps personal experience there is a booming wedding business that is centred in Las Vegas and Hollywood and which reaps millions of dollars. It is focused on being 'different' and often horrendously expensive. Hence there are those who marry while bungy jumping or deep sea diving, and the list continues.

This sort of wedding and resultant marriage is the fruit of the entertainment industry. Think of People magazine and television shows; think of wedding chapels with Elvis-impersonating rent-a-Rev; and imagine the glamour and intrigue connected with those scenes. I am not saying that this sort of wedding never produces a marriage that grows into maturity and honours God, but I will say that they seem to be focused on public impact. This notion of marriage has a lot to do with the event at the front end.

Now let's consider the Anglican Prayer Book which is steeped in Scripture, and what for many generations we professed to be the purposes of holy matrimony:

Holy matrimony was understood to be:

- for the mutual, help and comfort that one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and in adversity.

Also clearly articulated in the BCP is the theology that marriage was instituted before the Fall, "instituted in the time of man's innocency" and that it is a sign between Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5) and is demonstrated in the story of the wedding of Cana in Galilee (John 2), "which Christ himself adorned and beautified with his presence."

Such a view is beautiful but it is not the only 'model' of marriage in the pages of Scripture. It tends to synthesize the plurality of pictures of marriage in the Bible to say nothing of the montage of marriage models that has existed across time and space.

Sexual relations?

So what does the Bible say about marriage? First thing that needs to be said is that the Gospels are not obsessed about sexual relations. They are not very interested at all. However, there is a certain amount about divorce and some clear if disturbing teaching about eunuchs (men, you may wish to cross their legs).

As James Harding presented so very well in his paper yesterday, beyond a shadow of a doubt there is more teaching in the Gospels about discipleship than about marriage. The Gospel of Matthew clearly says that the Kingdom of Heaven is without marriage.

Indeed if we think of Luke 14. 26 there is the admonition to hate family members in order to put Christ before all others. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus goes so far as to re-define the family (which you must admit plays havoc with Family Values). Matthew 12.46-50; Mark 3.31- 35; and Luke 8.19-21 are parallels. To quote Mark 3:

Then his mother and his brothers came and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brother and your sisters are outside, asking for you". And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those sitting around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of my Father in Heaven is my brother, and sister and mother".

We should not be surprised by this as the baptism of Jesus re-defined the family. But it is interesting how easily we forget that the Gospel is Christocentric and more concerned about the making of disciples than who is allowed to marry.

When the Gospels do focus on marriage the concern is about divorce and adultery. But even more than being concerned about when marriage goes badly wrong is the persistent advocacy for the single state. I have mentioned Matthew 19, eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom, but where does that appear in modern teaching?

I suggest what is happening in the Gospels is a relaxation of the requirement to have children. Indeed there is no longer the requirement to keep the seed of Israel abundant and pure. It is possible, I believe, to argue that a blessed union of man and woman; or really any two people who are mutually committed; or even a committed Christian community people are all able to bear fruit in a number of different ways.

Fruit of good works

They are capable of bearing the fruit of good works and acts of mercy as many religious orders have done for centuries. There is also the New Testament calling to have spiritual children for the sake of the Kingdom. Recall the extraordinary passage in John 3 when Nicodemus goes to Jesus by night and asks questions:

He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi we know you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I say to you that you must be born from above."

It goes on from there and there have been some pretty legalistic readings of John 3 about the need to be born again in this or that way. But what if Jesus is really saying that in the world since the Incarnation, the word made flesh; since Immanuel, God with us, the new focus is on having spiritual children?

It is a parallel to the obligation of Israel to bear children to keep the People of Israel numerous and pure. The new teaching is to keep the Kingdom populated with Jesus' new family, which are those who do the God's will. Is the Gospel call to discipleship the new Kingdom imperative to assure the continuity of the seed? Remember we know from the parables that the seed is actually the word of God incarnate. (Matthew 13)

I invite you to hold on to that thought as we consider the Hebrew Scriptures and review what were the models of marriage over those centuries? What were the concerns and what were the prohibitions?

In the 20th century the Lambeth conferences became concerned with polygamy. What were African bishops doing permitting Christians to have multiple wives? At the time of the first debate, the first-world bishops completely missed the hard facts of their prohibition. Dismissing 'extra' wives and children was a sure-fire recipe for the starvation and hardship of those dismissed.

In later conferences attention was drawn to the fact that the Bible does not condemn polygamy. Indeed there are numerous instances of it. Why did that observation take so long? I suggest it is because what was the cultural norm for the first-world bishops hindered their ability to read Scripture and see what was actually on the page. Their comments were culturally conditioned. Their experience was the lens through which holy writ was read. We do need to be aware of what presuppositions we carry with us.

Cultural and social realities

The variety of cultures and models of marriage that are in evidence in the Bible is considerable. We know that. They mirror a multitude of different cultural and social realities. In the Old Testament in particular, the institution of marriage reflects the concern and need for property and procreation.

Broadly speaking, in the cultures outside Israel, marriage reflected or was meant to reflect the marriage of the gods and goddesses. But in Israel it is as a covenant between God and God's chosen people. By the time we reach Ephesians in the New Testament epistles, we have the mystical union of Christ and the Church, hence explaining the title 'Holy Matrimony' as adopted by the church in subsequent centuries. Note that the common thread is the participation of God.

Marriage in the Hebrew Scriptures is matriarchal in places. For example, both Jacob and Moses join their wife's household. In Exodus 3 just prior to the burning bush event, Moses is described as caring for the flock of his father-in law, Jethro, priest of Midian. In that one fragment of a verse we have both an indication of the dominant role of Moses' wife's family and the presence of a foreign religion and culture.

Elsewhere we see Abimelech and Samson both frequently visiting their wife's family. In some instances the woman was clearly a property owner. When Abraham's servant arrives in the city of Nahor, he encounters Rebekah's who runs to inform her mother's household. (Genesis 24.28) Later we learn that Leah and Rachel each own a tent (Genesis 31.33). I mention this because early on we see diversity in the development of differing models of marriage.

In many more instances there is an emphasis on the authority of the husband and father. This is evidenced by the naming of the children by the male figure (the name indicating the essence of the child.) The husband would define the rights and freedoms of the wife and even have the right to revoke an oath made by the woman before God. (Numbers 30. 10-14) In Jeremiah 6.12 wives are clearly identified as chattel property when named alongside fields as property seized by the enemy in raids.

In Genesis 29.28 and 34.8 we see the father giving his daughter to her future husband as a property transaction.

The word Baal which becomes increasingly negative and foreign in the story of the people of Israel has interesting origins. When not referring to the Divine, the word means husband or property owner. Thus again we have the sense of property transaction and ownership related to the marriage union.

Reasons for polygamy

I am not going to say much about polygamy other than to note it as a model of marriage. The many reasons for polygamy in the Bible stories include love and lust; the desire and need for children; the demands of diplomacy; and the requirement for sons for agricultural work and the equipping of the military force to guard the land or to assist in seizing other lands.

Monogamy is present in Scripture and not necessarily as the result of cultural evolution. It exists alongside polygamy. Many of the Hebrew laws strongly endorse this sort of marriage. (Exodus 20.17; 21.5; Numbers 5.12) Above all we should not forget the evidence of a strong erotic love between two people in the Song of Songs.

Two other terms are worth mentioning: exogamy is about who must be excluded from marriage. Endogamy is about who may be included. So in the conversation we are having at this Hui, we might well say we are discussing the history of exogamy and the possible transition to endogamy when we discuss same gender attraction and same sex unions.

It is a sort of conversation that has many places in Scripture. Paul and Barnabas at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) discuss the possible inclusion of Gentiles. Peter makes his case by saying the Holy Spirit has been given to the Gentiles 'as to us'. They subsequently decide to move from exclusion to inclusion with very few rules set out for Gentiles. It is most interesting that circumcision is not required.

Earlier in the Old Testament the same gradual move from exclusion to inclusion happens. In Genesis 36.2, Esau marries a Canaanite woman; in Genesis 41.45 Joseph does the same, and in Exodus 2.21 Moses marries foreign woman. The sons of Elimelech marry Moabite women (Ruth 1.4) and these women are mentioned in both the lineage of King David and Jesus (Ruth 1 and Matthew 1). The migration from being an outsider to being an insider is of top importance. Exogamy to endogamy is a process. Why does it happen in some places and not in others?

The desire to keep a particular covenanted people strong and pure is in evidence time and again as is the breaching of those walls and the discomfort and censure of such acts. Rules are relaxed when there is the confidence that the covenant group will continue and is not endangered.

In Nehemiah 13 there is the ghastly purging of foreign wives in hope of keeping the faith strong and pure. One must ask whether this was successful or is it historically the beginning of a major change where a religious group begins makes one last, violent, attempt to resist before beginning to accommodate the culture and adapt to a new reality. For those who see such accommodation as dangerous and a threat to purity, such accommodation is syncretism. Others see this in a more positive light and believe it is indigenization.

Other types of marriage in the Bible are marriage by capture (Judges 5.30; Deuteronomy 21.10-14) and marriage by purchase including the working for 7 years by Jacob for Leah and then again for Rachel. But praise for a wife in Proverbs 31 seems to take a stand against the notion of the wife as property and names the skills and contribution of the 'wife and partner' in the marriage.

Obviously, what we are considering is the marriage covenant as an alliance between the families of the bride and the groom.

Faithfulness is expected

The permanence of the marriage covenant is a constant throughout Scripture. Faithfulness is expected as God is faithful to Israel. In Hosea the prophet is told to take an unfaithful wife but to remain faithful and to be forgiving himself. Clearly this is a prophetic sign of the forgiving faithfulness of God towards God's people. Even a betrothal is considered binding.

In Genesis 19.14 the sons of Lot are to guard their betrothed women as if they were their wives. This appears in the New Testament when Mary is described as betrothed to Joseph and when she is with child, he is reluctant to put Mary away. In 2 Corinthians 11.2 we read "I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband."

So what are the theological statements we can make about marriage thus far?

Marriage in the Bible is a covenant. It is rarely between equals, but it is always a covenant. It is a sign of the relationship between God and God's people and it stands as a symbol of God's great and abiding faithfulness. Therefore when marriage does break down, it is serious. One can argue that each broken marriage is a sign of brokenness beyond that particular marriage.

The covenant imagery continues in the New Testament and appears in Ephesians in the passage on headship. The basis of this covenant is sacrificial love. In Ephesians 2.21-33, a passage that has been used in many arguments about headship and hierarchy, it is clear to me that the real focus is the sacrificial love God in Christ has for the Church.

What we learn in Ephesians 2, therefore, is that marriage is an incredibly deep relationship, adorned by God. Marriage is personal, sexual and spiritual. All the references to male and female and the union of two persons are meant to reflect the relationship of the Creator-Redeemer with the people of God in this world and in the life to come.

In Mark 10. 6b-8 we hear (harkening back to Genesis 2.24): "God made them male and female. For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall be one flesh." As the two become one, there is the echo of the separation of the woman from the man in the story of creation. Sue Patterson explained this beautifully yesterday.

But now with the new creation in Christ, I have to ask if the union of the male and female is as important, for now it is in Christ that we are made whole, not in the marriage bed. Could this be why the Gospels are not particularly focused on marriage beyond the teaching about faithfulness? What was for many generations, a social institution understood to keep the faith community secure and the lineage pure, becomes less central.

Transcendent love>

Galatians 3.28 tells us in no uncertain terms that baptism into Christ transcends ethnicity, gender and status under the law. Again one has to ask if this is why the Gospels have little to say about marriage. Even when we consider the woman with 5 husbands and presently a man who is not her husband in John 4, we realise that Jesus' concern is to lift the shame that the community has placed on her so that she might actually know afresh the love of God that transcends both Jew and in this instance Samaritan.

Going back to my premise that to be fully human is to live a life of worship, Jesus offers her living water that she need never thirst again. He lifts the restrictions that keep her a hostage of circumstances and sets her free.

Let us now focus on what the Bible teaches us about the integrity of every human person and the sanctity of human relationships.

Integrity is commonly understood to mean that the person or object is whole, self-contained and structurally sound or unbroken. When we apply integrity to people we think of strong moral principles and in some cases where it is applicable, high professional standards. But we know that all human beings, are flawed. We lost our integrity at the Fall (Genesis 3). In the words of Paul to the Romans (7.15): "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

Thus as human beings we do not have integrity; we are not unbroken. But we do have grace and we might say that the degrees of integrity we witness in the world is due to the gift of grace and is the fruit of our life in Christ and our relationship with God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

I suggest therefore that this means we are in no position to write off or exclude a particular group. Scripturally we know we are made in the image of God and through the grace of Christ we seek to have the likeness of God restored in us. It is by baptism we are incorporated into the body of Christ and via the Spirit we begin to partake of the divine nature (2 Peter 1.4). The Christian life, married or single, partnered or alone lived out in community, is nurtured and grows into holiness as 1 Thessalonians 5.23 says, "May the God of peace sanctify you entirely..."

You may wonder what this has to do with Biblical marriage. It has everything to do with marriage. Marriage requires two people created in the image of God, by God; two persons living lives of relative sanctity and sinfulness who come together to make promises and vows.

For Anglicans that would also mean the service being held consciously before the throne of grace and the seeking of God's blessing, pronounced by the Church. What then should inform the Church about who may and may not be wed in and by the church? We know that it is the couple who are the actual officiants. Matthew 7.1 comes to mind also: "Judge not so that you may not be judged."

What helps or hinders?

Of the things I have mentioned, what helps or hinders a particular relationship to be holy in the sight of God? Is it not, returning to the notion of living lives of worship, the surrender of the couple to the will of Christ? It is by giving our lives back to God that we are drawn into the life of the Holy Trinity.

We know there is joy as the presence of the Holy Spirit and Christ are recognized in the two members being wed. (Ephesians 2.4-32; Philippians 2-3; Galatians 5.14-25). But let's also be honest and say that that conscious surrender to God's will and recognition of the presence of Christ and the Spirit are not always in the mind of those being wed. Scripture also mentions the possibility of only one person in the couple is a believer. (1 Corinthians 7.12-14)

We live in a culture and a church where marriages both blossom and fail. We allow divorce because we believe that some marriages die and need to have their death acknowledged and mourned. We allow second and even third marriages because we worship the God who forgives and offers new beginnings. We are people of hope.

We also know that for many years when the church was the only route to marriage in most communities, clergy operated as servants of the state (and still do) and officiated at the marriage of many cultural Christians.

We are also aware that many marriages blessed by the church have ended in violence and abuse and that there are women particularly, but not exclusively, who have remained in violent relationships because of the sanctity of their wedding vows. More children than we could begin to number have also suffered from these abusive relationships. Many grow up to duplicate the abuse in their own marriages because that is all they have known.

That is why it is important to recognize the freedom in the Gospel for Christians to marry or not marry. Such freedom did not exist prior to the teaching of Christ. In the Old Testament there are widows but no single unmarried persons unless injury or illness exclude them from the marriage requirement.

But we live in a very different world. As Christians invited to be fully alive to the glory of God, we are free to remain single, to marry, to have children or to bear fruit to God's honour and glory in other ways. Our liturgies acknowledge that in making promises and vows to each other, there is an eternal dimension.

Not for the faint-hearted

Marriage is serious and not for the faint hearted. It is not for the selfish and self-absorbed. It is a calling that requires generosity of spirit, a reliance on God's grace and a willingness to both forgive and be forgiven on a daily basis. Historically and traditionally we have required certain, albeit different, body parts for each person in the couple being married. So at this time, marriage in New Zealand is defined as being between a man and a woman.

But in the same way we have revised our understanding of marriage so that the bride is no longer the property of her father to be handed over to the church to be delivered to the groom, so we do now recognize that not every marriage bears the fruit of children and that many other kinds of fruit to the glory of God may be the harvest of a loving marriage.

General Synod has invited us to re-consider who may marry. In terms of Christian discipleship we know beyond question that love for God and love of neighbour is offered by those with same-gender attraction. In some instances it is absolutely exemplary. I think we have moved beyond worrying about the exact requirements of sexual intercourse because there are many marriages where for

various reasons, such as age and infirmity, sexual intercourse cannot and is not part of the marriage of committed Christians .

I return now to my claim at the beginning of this paper that to be fully human is to worship ('Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord'). Scripture tells us that in Christ we are able now to worship in spirit and in truth the Triune God who creates, redeems and sanctifies (John 4.23-26).

Furthermore, as baptised Christians we know that through the Word made flesh, and the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are members of the new creation, and witness the breaking in of the Kingdom, and the setting free of the captives (Luke 4.18)

It is in this context of grace, we consider the request of committed disciples of Christ, that our church comes to re-think the definition of marriage for Christians. I know that among the many making this request are my brothers and sisters in Christ who call themselves lesbians and gay men.

I wish to end by referring to the Gospel for the feast of the presentation of Christ in the Temple (Luke 2. 22-38). Mary and Joseph enter the Temple carrying Jesus. We can easily imagine them as very proud and more than a little nervous. As a family they do not attract attention and they go unnoticed until Simeon and Anna recognize the infant as the Messiah.

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death until he had seen the Lord's Messiah." (Luke 2.25,26).

We are told that Simeon and Anna are people of prayer. We are told Simeon is guided by the Spirit. We know that Anna is a woman of great spiritual discipline and discernment. What is most clear is that when the Messiah enters the Temple, that the Beloved Son of God is not widely recognized, in spite of all the Scriptures that speak of the coming of the Messiah.

If the Messiah can be so overlooked, then what are we missing when we look at the beloved of God in the midst of the company of disciples today?