

Today, two of our readings are about marriage. These are two of the many passages that could have been chosen from the bible.

It is perhaps not surprising that we didn't have the story of Abram passing off his wife Sarai as his sister to save his own life, knowing that the Pharaoh would take her to bed. Nor did we have the story of King David making sure that Uriah, husband of Bathsheba, got killed so he could take Bathsheba for himself. And no mention was made of King Solomon's 700 wives and 300 concubines. Of course not, times change, in those days polygamy (particularly for Kings) was common, indeed expected; what was seen to be "socially acceptable" was completely different from the way we see things now.

The bible is our guide. It teaches us about God's relationship with us, his love for us. There is no part of the bible that cannot inform us about this. But the bible cannot be used as a guide to what are appropriate social customs for our time; customs are rooted in society and society changes. There is no way we would use the battles of the time of King David as our guide to morality in war - the slaughter of women and children and animals, gouging out of eyes, burning everything to the ground. No, we would say, times have changed. This is not acceptable behaviour.

People will often say, 'well, that's the Old Testament, but we can follow the teaching in the New Testament'. However, inevitably social customs in the Holy Land in the first century AD were also vastly different from now. Marriage is a good case in point. Women were seen as chattels - owned by the husband, to be discarded if they failed to live up to expectations, which often meant by failing to produce a son.

This is what that Jesus is speaking against in today's Gospel reading.

In the same way, so much of what seems problematic today for us in the letters of Paul about the role of women is actually about men keeping their side of the bargain. If they are going to be head of the household, that carries with it responsibilities. For its time, it was quite revolutionary. But none of this can be transported into our time without adjustment.

So what does the bible teach us about marriage today?

It is perhaps helpful to look at the history of Christian marriage, to see what we really understand by the word.

Historically, marriage has not primarily been about two individuals, but about the greater good of society as a whole.

For generations, a marriage was an arranged liaison between families. In richer families this would be for political or economic gain, but even in the poorer families, it was about gaining strong workers for the fields – husbands and then of course children. The married couple were expected to learn to co-operate with each other, to have children together, and perhaps even to love each other -- though excessive love between partners was, in many societies, thought very odd and even undesirable.

For the first 800 or so years of its existence, the church does not seem to have made many rules about marriage. However, as the church gained in influence, and alliances between Kings and Queens created repercussions for the power of the church, the church became more interested and involved.

Charlemagne was one of the first Christian monarchs to back the emerging church view. By our definition of marriage, he might not seem a good role model. He had several concubines. He cast aside his first wife in favour of a new bride. But he was nothing if not ambitious and the Pope wanted his support against the Byzantine empire. So an agreement was made, Charlemagne offered the Pope military support and agreed to enforce the rule on divorce that stated divorced people could not remarry. As his reward he was crowned Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day in the year 800.

But of course, the rich got around these laws. Their marriages were frequently annulled when they became inconvenient for one reason or another. The poor did not (could not) apply to the Pope if they wanted their marriage annulled, they just went ahead and separated and announced that they were divorced - and for many, childlessness was seen as a reasonable excuse. The church did not publicly condone this, but it looked the other way, as it had too many problems of its own in attempting to keep priests celibate.

Until the twelfth century, there was general agreement that marriage was valid if entered into by mutual consent and sealed by being consummated. Non-consummation was seen as grounds for divorce. But then Lombard, Bishop of Paris, argued that as Mary was a virgin, this meant that Joseph and Mary could not have been married. So the definition of a valid marriage was changed so that the exchange of vows – I take you to be my husband – made a marriage sacramentally and legally binding even if the couple remained celibate. The trouble was that this enabled couples to declare that they were married even when their parents objected. So in 1215, the 4<sup>th</sup> Lateran council

declared that for a marriage to be legal, the bride had to have a dowry, banns had to be published beforehand and the wedding had to take place in a church. However, Lombard's ruling still held. Whilst the church felt that clandestine marriages were wrong, it did not say they were not valid. So if a couple said the vows, even if no-one else was present, that was deemed to be an unbreakable bond and therefore binding. So for the first time there is a separation between legal and valid.

By this time, divorce was almost impossible. Separation was allowed on the grounds of adultery, a partner's heresy or extreme cruelty. But separation did not allow remarriage. So the only option was annulment. That was allowed if the two people were too closely related, or if it could be shown that one of them had already consented to marry someone else. The former rule was often used by the rich and the latter by the poor!

At various times in history the situation changed. In times of great trial, for example during and immediately after the Black Death, parental influence became less important and couples would marry for love, by simply declaring their vows to one another. A wedding ceremony really did not feature.

In this country, the Marriage act of 1753 stated that all marriages had to be performed in church with two witnesses and should be properly registered. The only exceptions were for Jews and Quakers; Roman Catholics had to marry in an Anglican church for their marriage to be legal. This persisted until 1837, when civil marriages were recognised as an alternative to church weddings. Still, in rural areas, many people did not have a ceremony, it was only if you owned property and there were likely to be any disputes about ownership that the legal ceremony became important.

We still have the preliminaries of Banns or licences of marriage, with the option of having a civil rather than a religious ceremony. So, not so much has changed. For the most part people marry for love, but there are still marriages that are motivated more by finance than love, and there are still marriages arranged between families. How the marriage starts does not necessarily determine how successful it will be. But how does any of this fit with the bible's teaching?

If we are to sum up the teaching of Jesus, who is our key to understanding God the Father, it is in those two great commandments, love God and love your neighbour. First, that to fit with Christ's teaching, marriage should not harm anyone. So any system that causes harm or has the potential to cause harm to another is not consistent with this teaching. That was why Jesus spoke as he did against divorce. A woman cast aside was often destitute, totally dependent on often unwilling relatives. There had to be respect and compassion and care. If we are to love our neighbours, it

also follows that society should be strengthened rather than weakened by marriage, for it is only a cohesive society that can care for its weakest members.

When families were joined by marriage, and people lived in large extended families, it was easy to see the effect of marriage on society. Today's nuclear families are very different. The nuclear family is a fragile unit, often coming under stress, but at best it is a good unit within which to bring up children. What benefits the family and therefore society as a whole, is family stability. Having said that, a family at war is not stable; there are undoubtedly times when divorce becomes the best option for future stability, both for the members of the family and for society as a whole.

Many couples in this country today cohabit, indeed recent research suggests that this is the fastest growing family type. A large number of those will never marry despite having children. They may well have made a commitment by having a joint mortgage, and to all intents and purposes they are living as though married. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century they would undoubtedly have been regarded as married. By today's laws they cannot be said to be married and this can cause legal problems if there is a break up. Frankly their lack of a marriage certificate does not damage society, and if the relationship is caring and stable it will not damage the individuals or children of the relationship. However, statistically, cohabiting couples are more likely to split than married couples. And serial or casual relationships with resultant failure to provide properly for children self-evidently do cause harm. Children require role models, they need to learn about responsibility, they need to understand that stable and lasting relationships are life-giving. It is impossible to have any meaningful relationship without responsibility. When we attempt to avoid those responsibilities, then individuals are harmed and society suffers. It is not so much the presence or absence of a marriage certificate that is important, it is the level of commitment.

Marriage is a commitment and when this is accepted it can provide the framework within which problems are sorted out, the relationship developed, and love is seen as something we do, rather than something we experience. As a Christian, the saying of the vows in church and receiving God's blessing upon the marriage are incredibly important.

I was asked by an elderly couple to take communion to them at their home after one of them had had a serious operation. He had worked in a lay capacity for the church of England for many many years. His partner was a committed Roman Catholic. They had been together as a couple for years. So it was natural in my prayers to give thanks for their relationship and to pray for them as a couple. They had never married, and now, as one of them was seriously ill, they yearned for a proper

blessing from the church in a church. This they never received. Their church does not allow it. Their church failed them. Why? Because they were gay.

We have Civil Partnerships for gay people. But the question we are being repeatedly asked today is: Can we have marriage? I recognise that for many people this is an extremely emotive subject, but we cannot turn away from exploring the issue.

As with any relationship, surely we should give thanks for stability, for the creation of loving units. Is this biblical? There are undoubtedly passages rooted in the social context of the day that would refute this. However, I would argue that yes, it is biblical. For what we know of Christ is that he did not want any to be outcasts, all were welcome, he wanted to ensure that no-one was hurt, that selfless love was honoured.

Marriage is a covenant, a promise. As such it requires respect, not just from the two partners, but from those around them. Our society seems ambivalent towards fidelity and therefore towards marriage – it allows websites devoted to encouraging extra marital affairs, it salaciously follows every celebrity's breakdown in relationship. If we value the concept of a caring society, we should encourage all that makes for stable relationship, whatever the gender and sexuality. At the same time, we should vehemently oppose all that fractures society, all that destroys relationships, all that diminishes humanity.

Withim this context, I cannot see why the church should not bless a stable gay relationship and allow gay marriage. As Desmond Tutu said:

“Every human being is precious. We are all - all of us - part of God's family. We all must be allowed to love each other with honour. Yet all over the world, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are persecuted. We treat them as pariahs and push them outside our communities. We make them doubt that they too are children of God. This must be nearly the ultimate blasphemy.”

I have no doubt that society will continue to change and that our view of marriage will also continue to adapt. This is not necessarily a bad thing, provided we keep always before us the need for care and respect of the individual, that we guard the interests of those who have no power, particularly children, and that we respect and promote all that strengthens society.

For we are beings in relationship, with each other and with God.