

Changing and unchanging

1 Cor.13

It is good to be with you, and to share some thoughts about marriage. It seems to have become a central part of my ministry, and I was appalled recently to find that apparently some people in church House Westminster refer to me as the Church's Marriage Guru. That is neither deserved, nor wanted. No-one can be an expert on anything other than their own marriage. So please don't expect words of wisdom from me. What I hope I can do is make you think.

Let me start with what we have just heard – Paul's 'hymn to love' as it is sometimes called in 1 Corinthians 13. It is probably just about the most popular reading at weddings, though very closely followed these days by the reading from the Song of Solomon 'Come away my love, my fair one.' Sometimes when people have chosen that for their wedding, in my few words I suggest we read a bit again, and I ask every to substitute their own name for 'love' as I read it – you see how it soon gets you feeling a bit uneasy. Because however loving we may be, we will pale beside the example of God's love in Jesus which is what that chapter is about.

Relationships are at the heart of our existence, and marriage is probably the deepest and the most demanding of them. But as the Preface to the Marriage service says, marriage is a gift of God in creation. We are made for relationships. I wonder if you know this wonderful piece from the Iona Community in Scotland:

"In the beginning, God made man. He was so disappointed that he tried again, and the next time he made woman.

Eve, the first woman, was a vegetarian. She liked apples, and ate the wrong one. Men have been suspicious of vegetarians ever since.

Noah didn't eat apples. He was a man...so he drank alcohol. In fact he drank so much that one day his sons found their old man completely sozzled and lying in the nude. Women have been suspicious of alcohol ever since.

Lot didn't eat apples, or drink wine. He just lived in a city where the men didn't know who they fancied. So God told him to leave the city, and so he did. God said 'Don't look back, for I'm going to burn down the city. So Lot didn't look back, but his wife did and she was turned into a pillar of salt. Women have never looked back since.

Delilah didn't eat apples, drink wine or look back. She was a hairdresser. Samson didn't know that, but whilst he was resting his macho muscles, Delilah cut his hair and took his strength away. Men have avoided being bald ever since.

St Paul didn't know Eve, Noah, Lot or Delilah. But he did know some women, and those he did must have given him bad memories, because he told them not to speak in church, not to go into church without a hat and always obey their husbands. Paul also said that men should not get married unless they were unable to control themselves. Men have been unable to control themselves ever since.

But Jesus was different. He was strong, but he cried. He even cried in front of other men. He knew that some women had bad reputations, but that didn't keep him back from them. He knelt beside them. He loved his disciples, who were all men and wasn't afraid to tell them that he loved them. And although he never married, he was always surrounded by women, who at his death were more faithful to him than the men.

Jesus didn't make a fuss about who was who, or what was what. He said that everyone who loved him was his mother, his sister, his brother.

THANK GOD FOR JESUS.”

It is in knowing the love of God in Jesus that we are best equipped to be loving – to wife, husband, child or whoever. But it is easy to get idealistic – and I suspect that is why some marriages fall apart – couples expect perfection of each other, and they are never going to get that. And in an age where getting things repaired is often more difficult and more expensive than replacing things, we run the risk of throwing away something eminently repairable, and which, having had repairs, can be stronger than ever – they say that when you weld something it is often stronger than it was originally. It was my privilege for thirty years to work as a marriage counsellor. Now counsellors never advise. I used to tell my clients that I was a mirror. A mirror helps you to see clearly where you hair is out of place, and when you have

got it straight, but I have yet to find a mirror which can do the combing. I have heard some fairly devastating situations over those years, and yet some at least of them found a way of repair and renewal – sometimes to my own bewilderment!

But that brings me to one of two quotations from the wedding service I would like to share. The first are those words from the vows ‘for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health’. If you hear the vows that people cook up for themselves on the Australian soaps, they are universally sentimental and sickly – ‘cringe-making’ was how someone described them to me the other day. What they don’t have is the utter realism of the vows we use. It would be a strange couple who stood there thinking ‘It’s going to be worse, sick and poor’ – but they might well think the other three. The strength of the vows is that it says both. It is open-eyed, not dewy-eyed. It is feet on the ground stuff. And when I think about those words, two couples come into my mind. You may have seen a TV documentary about one of them – in fact there have been two. They were both called ‘Malcolm and Barbara’ – two dear friends of ours. Malcolm at the age of fifty-one contracted Alzheimer’s, and to the surprise of the medics lived for another fifteen years, dying eventually at the beginning of 2007. It was the story of Barbara’s immense courage, fuelled by her undying love for a man who at one stage turned violently on her, and for the last few years did not know who she was. She nursed him to the end, at home, and has gone on to fight for better treatment and support for others in similar situations. The other couple were friends of my brother’s. He was a profoundly unsentimental man. His bubbly and lovely wife got MS a few months after their marriage, and became very ill very quickly. He nursed her for fifteen years, and the week she died said to me ‘I couldn’t have had a happier marriage’. She was still her and he was still him. They lived as they had vowed, for better for worse. What wonderful illustrations of those vows those two couples have been for me.

But it doesn’t have to be dramatic things like serious illness – all marriages have ups and downs. I find that couples preparing for marriage greatly welcome talking about how they handle those less good times. There are no guarantees, no panaceas – but there is the chance to develop the natural communication skills which will be of enormous help when problems arise.

And of course marriage as an institution has changed, and will go on changing. You think how the 1662 BCP service was ‘The Solemnization of Matrimony’ and CW talks of ‘sharing their

joy and celebrating their love.’ Or how the BCP talks about marriage being ‘to satisfy men’s carnal lusts and appetites like brute beast that have no understanding’ and compare that with CW’s ‘delight and tenderness of sexual union’. I have been married 41 years, and I know there are some here who can outbid me on that. But listen to advice from women’s magazine in 1951:

Have dinner ready. Plan ahead, even the night before, to have a delicious meal ready for his return. Prepare yourself. Touch up your make-up, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh-looking. Prepare the children. Take a few minutes to wash the children’s hands and faces. They are little treasures and he would like to see them playing their part. Listen to him. Let him talk first – remember his topics of conversation are more important than yours. Don’t complain if he’s late for dinner, or even if he stays out all night. Count this as minor compared to what he might have gone through that day. A good wife always knows her place.

We live in a different world, and I will not risk saying in the pulpit what any self-respecting young woman (or man for that matter) would say if that were offered as advice today. It is a reminder that although ++Rowan is right in saying we mustn’t ‘regard marriage as just one option in the marketplace of lifestyles’ we have to work out what marriage means in practice in our day and age and culture. It won’t be the same as for people fifty years ago, or indeed for people in different places and cultures today – at least, not in its *detail*. But at its *heart* – the commitment to love, for better or worse, and so on, is unchanging, like God’s love, which as William Cowper wrote in the hymn ‘.is an unchanging love, Higher than the heights above, Deeper than the depths beneath, Free and faithful, strong as death.’

But in closing let me bring you to another line from the wedding service, and to one of the most profound things that has ever been said to me by someone getting married. The line I have in mind is ‘All that I am I give to you.’ The person who made such a deep impression on me was a young bridegroom. I do mean young – he was sixteen, maybe seventeen. He had asked me ‘when are we actually married’ – and playing for time I asked him what he thought. His reply was ‘I shall never stop getting married’ When I asked what he meant he said ‘It said “all that I am I give to you” but I don’t know all that I am yet, and when I find out the rest, I will have marry that bit too.’ I have passed his words on to so many people. Whether you are 17, 27 37 or 77 that must remain true. As with our discipleship, our love for Christ, we have to go on becoming what we are.