

The Tough Questions: Theology of Marriage Conference

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Let me begin with a word of appreciation for the invitation to address this conference and for the papers already delivered.

It is proof of God's great sense of humour that I have spent considerable time as priest and bishop writing about the theology of marriage. I say that because I am the rarest of creatures: a happy celibate. (Just a minor challenge here of a definition Bishop Tim gave last evening: I do not believe celibacy is a special charism. I believe it is a discipline just like fidelity is if you are married. Sometimes it is a joy and sometimes it is a pain, but you always know it is right.) As I explore the theology of marriage let me be very clear this married state is not something I desire for myself. Indeed whether marriage should be exclusively heterosexual or inclusive of homosexuals is not the question for me. For me the question we are missing in all our discussions is, 'Why is marriage desirable?' Why have we continued to worry about the sanctity of marriage to such a degree when there is ample evidence in the New Testament that the understanding of marriage in the world Christ came to save is somewhat different than prior to the coming of Christ, and His death and resurrection. As I argued in my paper at the February Hui, there is clear evidence that procreation and marriage are less important under the New Covenant than under the Old. Clearly in the early church the belief that marriage is not the best option is made clear in 1 Corinthians 6.12 through 1 Corinthians 7. In particular I quote for you 1 Corinthians 6.19 and 1 Corinthians 7.1: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: *It is well for a man not to touch a woman*". There is clear indication that, as members of the new creation, the need to marry and procreate is not obligatory. The Christian desire to define what is and is not marriage is actually a late 20th and early 21st century social construct. Furthermore it is only in the last couple of decades that there has been the suggestion that Christians should feel sorry for those who are unmarried. I have even read evangelical admonitions that suggest it is

appropriate to pity the single person. To be single does not necessarily mean being lonely. To be single is not the same as being isolated socially. Significant numbers of single people do claim they wish they had a partner but when asked what they have done to seek a partner, frequently they have neither acted nor even thought of how to meet such a person. Then there are those who desire marriage but say it has been denied them. This is largely but not exclusively the group that self-identifies as gay or lesbian in long term partnerships, and until now unable to marry in New Zealand. But we do have to remember that that is not the universal gay/lesbian voice. They are others who say marriage itself is a heterosexual construct and they want no part of it. So I do think we need to honour those who not think that the married state is part and parcel of being a member of the Body of Christ.

In terms of this Conference, Peter Carrell has asked me to speak about the theology of marriage as companionship and I am pleased to do so. The discussion of companionship holds a prominent if not widely recognized role in the history of the theology of marriage. Scripture will be the first witness.

The first example of companionship that usually comes to mind is the creation account in Genesis 2.18 & 20. "The Lord God said it is not good for the human to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him...but for the human no suitable helper was found." In the past this word 'helper' was frequently understood to be a sort of domestic assistant and lesser being to the male human. That was the result of poor exegesis and teaching. *Ezer* is found only 21 times in the bible. Interestingly three times it is in a military context. Twice it refers to Eve. The rest of the time it actually describes God. God is described as helper, assistant, companion and as the One who strengthens. The uses all refer to life giving, powerful help. *Ezer* describes God's character: One who rescues, protects, defends and helps. One last example of an adaption of this word: Moses calls one of his son's Eliezar(Exodus 18.4) which means 'God is my helper'. Obviously this is not in reference to God doing Moses' washing and ironing but God leading Moses out of Egypt. Genesis 2.24 is another very well known verse: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." Becoming one flesh is God's stated purpose for marriage. But now let's step back and examine what that means. Two people become one but they still inhabit separate bodies. It

is arguable that the primary end of becoming one flesh is not sexual intercourse but companionship. Becoming your betrothed's companion leads to a union that is beyond the physical. We learn this from Malachi who chastises husbands for mistreating their wives. "The Lord has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously. Yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant." (Malachi 2.14) The passage does go on to mention offspring but foremost is this word and concept: *companionship*.

There are two different Hebrew words which are translated as 'companion' in Scripture. In addition to *ezer* there is *rea*. Both point to a friendship that occurs when two souls are knit together. Knitting is an interesting description for companionship because more than one strand of wool can be used to knit a pattern. Two become one when knitting, or so it seems. Furthermore, two are stronger than one. In marriage we expect the couple are intertwined into a close and intimate friendship. Of course marriage has physical intimacy but every marital relationship also is meant to involve a knitting together of the couple into a resilient partnership. Thus we could say that marital disharmony (emotional or physical) causes stitches to be ripped out or dropped, causing damage to the knitted garment.

Companionship is rooted in love. Not necessarily erotic love (*eros*) but certainly friendship love (*phelos*). This companionship has a mutuality that gives, receives and cares for each other so that each person is stronger because of the other. In Scripture this sort of friendship is what is recognized as the bond between David and Jonathan. 1 Samuel 18.1 says, "...the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David and Jonathan loved him as his own soul." While there are those that claim this describes a homosexual relationship, I do not. I suggest to you that the David and Jonathan relationship is no more than the intimate companionship between friends or soul-mates. This particular description follows immediately upon David's courageous killing of the giant Goliath in the presence of Saul in which David reveals the strength of his resolve to serve God and King. Jonathan witnesses this heroic act and is moved to see that both he and David, while very different in terms of social status (Jonathan is the eldest son of a King, hence the crown prince, while David is the youngest son of a farmer), nevertheless share the

same deep commitment and fierce courage. All thought of homosexual activity aside, the description of Jonathan and David in Scripture offers us language about male friendship that parallels the friendship or companionship language about marriage. Jonathan's love is actually sacrificial as David will eventually become King rather than Jonathan. Nevertheless, Jonathan loves and does not hate David. Hence we see both marriage and friendship can share one end: companionship.

In the New Testament similar language is used about the Christian community. Colossians 2.2 tells us, "I want their hearts to be encouraged, being knit together in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself." Clearly it is the love of God that knits us together as members of the Body of Christ. So now we see three ways of being knit together in love: marriage, friendship and as members of a community in Christ. If relationships are knit together in love within the Christian community, as well as in reference to marriage, then the companionship language clearly is not exclusive to the marriage bed but in fact much broader in application. This in no way lowers the bar for marriage, but rather raises the bar for all relationships in Christ. Ephesians 5 clearly demonstrates that the companion relationship between man and woman also holds true for the body of Christ the Church. *'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'. This is a great mystery and I am applying it to Christ and the Church.* (Ephesians 5. 31&32)

Moving out from Scripture (although much more could be said), let me turn to the early and medieval church. In the early fourth century Bishop Gregory Nazianzus wrote of his friendship with Basil, his contemporary in holy orders and eventually his archbishop, as two streams of the same river. Basil's virtue and faithfulness was claimed by Gregory to challenge him to be his best self for Christ. The eulogy he wrote at the time of Basil's death suggests two souls knit together by and for the love of God.

Bishop Augustine of Hippo wrote his work *On the Good of Marriage* early in the fifth century, around the same time he penned the works *On Holy Virginity*; *On the works of Monks*; and *On Good Widowhood*. Augustine wrote about the relative merit of virginity and marriage for Christians. He awarded

celibacy a higher status than marriage, but also wrote positively of marriage. Remember it is at this time that the Manichees, and even Jerome (who should have known better), were writing against the pleasure of the flesh and actually denouncing marriage. But Augustine praises marriage as offering companionship and a bond of charity. Yes, being Augustine, he did also say it was also an effective way of handling one's sex drive, and he also points out that sexual intercourse does populate the earth. But this is how he ends: 'The final good of marriage is its 'sign value'. Within marriage is an indissolubility which is a sign of the unity of all who are and will be subject to God in heaven'.

Jumping ahead into the early middle ages, Aelred of Rievaulx was born in 1167 in Durham and at the age of 24 entered a Cistercian monastery at Rievaulx in Yorkshire. His most famous work is *Spiritual Friendship* in which he extols the virtues of friendship. At the time Aelred wrote, there was a re-examination of what was the highest calling to which a Christian could aspire. Scripture was being appealed to by the various religious communities with some citing, as a sort of proof text, that when Jesus learned that his family was waiting outside for him, he commented, "All who do the will of my Father are my family." (Matthew 12.50). At that time some monastic houses concluded from this that all friendships were to be discouraged or even forbidden. Proponents of this view believed that while a monk was to have charity towards all, friendships as well as family intimacy were forbidden. Contrary to that perspective, Aelred, in his writing, upheld the value of friendship and believed it was in keeping with the highest level of Christian discipleship to have and nurture the company of special friends. He points out that we learn in Scripture about the disciple whom Jesus loved (John chapters 13; 20 and 21), and that Mary, Martha and Lazarus were Jesus's friends (John 11). Illustrating this is the collect for 12 January, when the church calendar remembers Aelred of Rievaulx, with this prayer: "Pour into our hearts, we beseech thee, O God, the Holy Spirit's gift of love, that we, clasping each other's hand, may share the joy of friendship, human and divine, and with thy servant Aelred draw many into the community of love; through Jesus Christ the righteous, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the holy Spirit, one God, now and forever."

These are just three examples that suggest that friendship between same gendered persons or between the opposite genders is not all that different

from marriage insofar that marriage and friendship involves finding a companion or companions. Indeed friendship is spoken of as the companionship of kindred souls knit together into one for the glory of God. I find this fascinating, because I am aware that since the debate about same sex relationships and preferences has begun to dominate Christian discourse about morality, there is a reluctance to talk about intimacy outside of the bonds of marriage. But that is nonsense. Human beings need intimacy. If you are a committed Christian and single that is likely to be nurtured by one's relationship with friends. I do not believe the minute a married couple lose either the ability or freedom to engage in sexual intercourse that there is no longer intimacy in the marriage. If that was so, intimacy probably left the marriage long before a medical condition halted it.

It is my conviction that we have become obsessed with body parts and sexual intercourse whereas the Scriptures and Christian literature easily gives as much attention to the quality of the relationship and the intimacy of the friendship. Even the Song of Solomon which is clearly about a carnal relationship pays attention to the spiritual relationship.

Set me as a seal upon your heart,

As a seal upon your arm;

For love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.

Its flashes are flashes of fire,

a raging flame.

Many waters cannot quench love,

Neither can floods drown it.

If one offered for love

all the wealth of one's house

it would be utterly scorned. (Song of Solomon 8.6-7)

Previous generations would have understood this poetry to be speaking as much about soul mates as about physical love. But for reasons we do not quite understand, our culture and age have become obsessed with sexualising relationships. Just think of how children's clothes and toys are advertised. Society pays the most money to those who are sexually attractive and appear available. In response, the church works at stronger definitions about what is right and wrong; good and bad; allowed and forbidden. I suspect this has to do with a sense of loss of control over the norms of behaviour in our society. As we begin to sense loss of control, we rush to define things even more robustly, often to the detriment of all concerned.

If that is true, and you may or may not agree, what can we learn about ourselves at this Conference? Is it fair to speak about the sanctity of marriage when we fail to address the holiness of friendship? There are models in Christian history of covenanted same gender relationships which seek to sublimate the sexual drive and nurture instead the shared commitment to Christian service and devotion. Florensky, a Russian Orthodox theologian wrote about this idea of a blessed and covenanted same gendered celibate relationship in 1914 in a book entitled *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, but it was not translated into English until 1997. Dr Gary Thorne is responsible in part for bringing it to a wider audience exploring questions of friendship and marriage, their similarities and differences. It is an excellent start to a topic that demands more work in the near future.

This begs the question of whether marriage is sacramental and distinct because it involves the exchange of vows. If so, then entrance into a religious community which requires life long vows is another analogous relationship. Religious communities are about caring for one another in Christ even to the point of washing one another's feet as Christ washed the feet of the disciples. It is interesting that the recent revival of religious communities is happening where there is a membership inclusive of single persons, married couples and families with children. The depth of commitment is the same but the appearance and arrangements have changed. Again companionship and discipleship are central to this way of life. Although the requirements for

membership have changed considerably, the communities are still recognized as monastic orders. Isn't that curious?

So what are the tough questions about the theology of marriage? Is it about what constitutes an appropriate blessed sexual union, ie marriage, between persons with respect to gender? Is it about the appropriate response of the Christian community when a marriage becomes violent and abusive? Is it about recognising that one of the greatest detriments to healthy marriage is the lack of support the church offers newly married couples and new parents? Or perhaps it is how do we re-discover the Christian calling to live deeply and sacrificially as members of the body of Christ, so that where and how we live; how we nurture deep friendships; how we earn and spend our money; and with whom we share our deepest joys and sorrows, are questions that matter as much as the gender differentiation of the couple. The Rev Spanky Moore who leads the young adult ministry initiative in this Diocese says that many of his contemporaries start living together simply because the arrangement helps lower the rent and cost of broadband. But after a while the nature of the relationship changes and sexual activity becomes recreational. Then one day they decide that children should be contemplated or perhaps they are already a reality, and suddenly whether to marry becomes part of the equation. "The problem", he says, " is that no one has ever asked them what they will do when one of them gets stomach cancer. No one has talked to them about what it means to live sacrificially for each other." What began as a convenience and moved on to distraction and entertainment becomes suddenly too hard and the marriage crumbles. The Church has failed to teach about the cost of discipleship and what true companionship means. Perhaps it was such things in mind that causes Paul to write to young Timothy in these words (1 Timothy 3.15): "I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing you these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of truth." The problem is not that we are messing with the definition of marriage so much as we have all but lost the notion of the discipline of discipleship and just how costly that can be. To say that homosexual marriage is contrary to the continuation of the species is a bit much. Lots of homosexual couples have children one way or another. But to

be a mature companion of another, regardless of gender and sexual activity, that demands the highest possible Christian response: to be a living sacrifice.

I want to share this quotation from DrWalter Deller:

Like Jesus, we find our full humanity in two ways: by setting aside ourselves and our claims to attain the healing, wholeness and reconciliation of the world; and by insisting, at every moment of judgement public and private, on the dignity and rights of every one who is a brother or sister of the Human One. Only when we do that can we participate in undoing our share in the cross of Jesus, and only then do we begin to be drawn into the divine life of freedom and responsibility. (The Galilee Report, Anglican Church of Canada)

Read Romans 12 in it entirety to conclude.