

The Sacrament of Marriage

People have struggled for thousands of years to understand correctly what human beings are. Some of the answers they have offered have been pretty grotesque, as strange as some of the human beings themselves. Most people have come to a state of wonder before the realisation that human beings are distinguished by self-consciousness, the ability to take a critical look at themselves. I personally value the perennial presence, or resurgence, of the question as much as most of the offered answers.

Many people may never get as far as thinking these thoughts. But everyone human does the work of reflecting, has consciousness, carries in memory and in conviction the fruits and burdens of this self-awareness. To some extent we give our answer to “what is a human being?” by the life we choose or seek to lead; but something more is going on than we have control over. Someone else is teaching us what a human being is. It is in relationship that this teaching can be most powerfully felt. It is very complex, and enters into strange places in our being. It lodges in our dislikings as well as our likings, and its most powerful lessons are taught by disaster rather than triumph. What is dimly appearing is that the deepest meanings are hidden where there is suffering that ends in death.

I want today to speak about the Sacrament of Marriage, a mystery that unfolds in the most intimate fields of our awareness and the high places of our being. As the nascent human being is the matter for Baptism, as the bread and wine of the earth and Christ’s sacrificed body are the matter for the Eucharist, the matter for marriage is the total earthly fate of a man and a woman, entrusted to each other in love. It is as if they are saying: *in you I have found what it is to be human.*

We can use some of the categories we explored yesterday to talk about marriage. It is certainly and clearly to do with encounter, at a level both very high and very deep. It is serious, because it is total – involving the whole selves of the couple, and all the details that make up their lives. It is the privilege of husbands and wives to welcome each other, and also to explore each other: in this encounter everything is opened up in the warm atmosphere of mutual love. This entrusting of the self radically opens the personality, much as a flower is opened by the sun. Clearly the potential is that there will be revelation in this engagement for both parties: not simply about the other, but about the self.

Now, this teaches us clearly something vital about human beings: we are not bodies with minds attached, but embodied minds. The mind expresses itself in bodily ways, and self-understanding is a dynamic, evolving reality which takes fire from relationship. This bodily relationship presents us with this reality in a multi-layered, kaleidoscopic way. Thus the Song of Songs can be absolutely graphic about sexual love and still be talking about God: *his left arm is under my head, and his right hand embraces me* is a sentence about God’s love for Israel, but it is absolutely incarnated in a sexual experience. (Read it, by the way!)

Now, Christian Marriage includes, frames, embodies the whole mystery of sexuality – with which our age is obsessively preoccupied – in a way which reveals it as only a part of a greater mystery which is the love of God for each of his creatures. What makes sexuality – and, *a fortiori*, marriage itself – so huge a problem for us, is that we have detached it from its setting in the greater mystery which *justifies* it. *Justifying* means *making right*; I guess you could translate it as *making good*.

Now comes the payoff, where we actually realise that the mystery we experience in marriage exactly parallels our understanding of the encounter with Christ. Marriage comes about through the perception of fulness or blessedness in the person we love, through the experience of his or her benevolence – the miraculous truth that the person we love loves us – and the growing realisation that we can trust each other with the total gift of ourselves.

In the imbalance of the last sentence, you can probably already see that the restriction of this understanding to the space between two human beings is not enough. The journey of marriage has two things about it which make it insufficient, of itself, to justify its cost. One shortcoming is that the partial nature of our self-possession restricts our capacity to give ourselves: this results in a constant engagement with things like selfishness, vanity, power-struggles and the like, which are dangerous to the generosity and fulness of the married experience. The second shortcoming is that marriage is only “till death us do part”; but our search for meaning is actually extended over, and beyond, death. Marriage depends on a total quality which, of itself, it doesn’t actually possess. I believe that this negative realisation is what actually lies behind the phenomenal rate of marriage breakdown in our country, and the widespread perception that marriage is out of date. It isn’t that humanity has changed. It is that the attempt to make sense out of marriage falls short when it is lived as a purely human institution. Demanding a *total* gift for something so patently limited comes to be seen as *unjustified*, and so fails.

Simply to suggest, as some do, that there are *three* persons in a Christian marriage (the third being God) is one of the messiest and most confusing statements I know. The suggestion is of some incomprehensible *ménage à trois* which demands the understanding of God as “a third person”. This idolatrous rot is further complicated by the cardinal importance of the Trinity (which produces by my reckoning a *ménage à at least cinq*). God, we need to remind ourselves, is not a *part* of his own Creation, but the one who holds it all in being, the one to whom it actually makes sense. Therefore the proper place for marriage exactly parallels the place of the world itself: waiting for God to reveal its purpose, its ultimate meaning, in his own good time, the fulness of time.

Now, this is no world for love. Love means being free and generous and ready to belong. This is a very subversive concept, capable of upsetting the whole world order that is based on moderate repression of humanity (police and politicians and laws). Love freely decides not to be constrained like that, but to live in generous freedom, taking the command to give and to suffer as far as it will go. Those who do this are exploited, and, if they really insist, they get killed as Jesus was: condemned and crucified.

If marriage is about love, and is a real entrance into humanity, it too will involve some kind of crucifixion. Maybe it won’t be a public execution, but you will feel yourself stretched between the decision to love and the world’s refusal of love. When that happens, you either look death in the eye and assent to it, or you get out. Half the population gets out, because crucifixion is humanly inexcusable. But Jesus died of being human, being too human for this world. If you stay, and allow your love to be pushed to its conclusion, you will end up going beyond humanity, you will enter into the area of divine life, where things happen that can only be explained, *justified*, by God. You will start to kill off sin, which is the absence of love, and you will go on inheriting love, until you become quite unfit to live in the world. “*This world is not totally unfit for human habitation, but it can take just so much of it. You have to ration your love, keeping a wary eye out for enemies if you want to survive. Jesus did not ration his love, so naturally he didn’t last.*” (H McCabe, *God Still Matters*)

So what we usually do is to *ration* our humanity so as to keep ourselves justified in worldly terms. We are willing to share, but not to the point where we lose our livelihood. We are willing to give, and forgive, but not to the point where we're taken advantage of. We have to survive, we say. That is what Jesus doesn't say, and that is why he ends up as he does. Christian marriage, therefore, is the experience of a life that doesn't blow the whistle on love, and therefore transcends itself and calls on divine gifts of life. When people do this, they express the faith that this is where the answer to the question lies: *What is a human being?* In the mind of God, a human being is someone destined to share divine life. That is why marriage is a sacrament, and has to be a sacrament, and can't survive in its proper *fulness* unless it is a sacrament. If you love as Jesus loved, the world, which doesn't want love and cannot afford love, will hate you. It will tell you to want something less, it will tell you you can't afford it. Even together with someone we really love, it is very difficult to speak against such authority. But then, it is perhaps even harder to oppose the power of the love of God. For this reason, the marriage which is open to the love of God as its explanation has the power – a divine power – to survive the world, and to be part of the story of death and resurrection.