

The Mass today is about the sign Jesus gives by laying down his life, which is the mystery we have been trying to penetrate throughout Lent and Easter this year. I'd like to say a few things about marriage.

Most people used to find their vocation to do this laying-down of life in the sacrament of marriage. I find that parenthood is the fastest way I can think of to reach heroic sanctity; I think you can be pretty sure you've achieved that if your children arrive unstrangled at adulthood. But marriage is the prior and more instructive part of the mystery, just because it so clearly engages the whole personality, and because it leads us to a generosity we can't actually justify by any logic or business sense. It is here that people are moved to the experience of laying down their lives. But not everyone, by any means, today.

In 1960 we thought we had invented a much more convenient way of behaving, which was called "the relationship". This was made possible by the contraceptive Pill, and was an open-air version of what used to be called fornication, but without the thrillingness caused by the danger of parenthood, the guilt, or the need for secrecy. When society decided this was the way forward, being less expensive than weddings followed by divorces, there was an instant decline in weddings, to the point where they are only a very rare phenomenon nowadays, and it cannot be long before the bottom falls out of the divorce market, because there will be very few marriages left to fall apart.

We are undergoing a new phase today, where quite a few ladies are deciding that their alleged liberation in the '60's has turned out only to be a trap to get them to behave like men, and that the contraceptive pill is not something they particularly enjoy emptying into their bloodstreams. Free love is also proving to be as cheap an experience as everybody had hoped, and instead of leading to greater intimacy and deeper respect, we are finding the general tenor of life getting more and more shallow and less and less significant. Where boys used to find it deeply interesting what was happening inside the body of the girl they loved, they now let it be, on condition that nothing unfortunate is allowed to happen; and so the sexes have moved further apart rather than closer; and since marriage was jettisoned as an unnecessary piece of paper, there are quite surprising numbers of single mothers, who have fallen through the thoughtfully-provided safety-net of abortion, and given birth to one-parent families. Those hooked on the career-ladder find it nearly impossible to get off, and frequently find they have accidentally left it too late to be parents, perhaps too late to be married: there never is a right time, with all the debt people have to live with. Quite extraordinary numbers of women have children from several "relationships" - each of which has come to an end and been tidied away - and if such women now think that they were conned or betrayed by others, I couldn't see any way to argue with them.

Against all this cynicism and sadness I would just hold up to you the figure of Christ the Shepherd, who lays down his life for those who need him. He has no selfish agenda, no exploitation: he dies generously, in holy obedience to the command of God. He loves us to the end, and he asks us to find our way to do the same. To be a Christian is to believe that this is the way to enter into life. Marriage and parenthood, to my mind, fulfils that pattern, and says that it does: *for better, for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health to love and to cherish until death*. Those words I find deeply moving, and if they are heeded and remembered in and out of season, they are passports into eternal life.