

The changing face of marriage



From the Director and Canon Theologian

Around the time when WIT Council was planning the next issue of this newsletter, the Marriage (Definition of Marriage) Amendment Bill was about to have its first reading in Parliament. That Bill seeks to amend the Marriage Act 1955 to ensure that its provisions are not applied in a discriminatory manner and aims to ensure that all people, regardless of sex, sexual orientation or gender identity, will have the opportunity to marry if they so choose. If passed it would provide for marriages between two people of the same sex. Set alongside that is the 'Ma Whea?' Commission established by our General Synod / Te Hinota Whanui to help us wrestle with issues surrounding same sex relationships and the Church. The Commission is looking at Same-Gender Relationships, and the Ordination and Blessing of People in Same Sex Relationships.* So that's the background to this WIT Newsletter on Marriage.

In it we offer a number of perspectives. Peter Carrell sets out an understanding of what a biblical view of marriage looks like – having first summarised a particular understanding of the Bible upon which 'a biblical view of marriage' can be based. Darryl Ward looks at the way the institution

of marriage has been refined and redefined to fit the social requirements and moral codes of the day. Like Peter, I take one of the Genesis creation accounts as my starting point but proceed in a slightly different direction: the idea that a marriage should produce something. Sometimes what a marriage produces is children, but there are other possibilities. Jenny Chalmers suggests that the Church should simply give up officiating at weddings (as an agent of secular government) and concentrate instead on liturgies that acknowledge the legal agreement established elsewhere and which celebrate a uniquely Christian perspective on marriage. That's the system I remember from living in Europe, where couples would go off to the Town Hall one day for the legal formalities and then on another day (and in other clothes!) have the religious service.

Some things for us all to think about.

Deborah Broome

* <http://www.anglican.org.nz/News/Ma-Whea-Commission-on-Same-Gender-Relationships-Ordination-and-Blessing>

A biblical view of marriage

A biblical view of marriage is necessarily a particular understanding of the Bible before it is a biblical view of marriage. The Bible is a small library of books invested by Christians as Holy Scripture in virtue of the writings known as the Old Testament (OT) being endorsed by Jesus Christ and the subsequent scriptures known as the New Testament (NT) being generated by Christ commissioning his apostles to preach the gospel. In accordance with Christ's own interpretation, the OT is cherished by his disciples as the writings which foretell Christ's coming and the meaning of his life and death (Luke 24). The NT consciously draws on the OT (often in its expanded Greek form) to set out the accounts of Jesus' mission (the gospels), the expansion of the mission (Acts), and theological reflection arising from that mission (the epistles). Holy Scripture thus is received by the Church as a gift from Christ through the Spirit. The Church has not 'written' the Bible in the sense that through subsequent ages it is entitled to rewrite it: Holy Scripture is God's written Word under whose authority the Church exists. A biblical view of marriage, then, is a view of marriage developed within the pages of Holy Scripture as the Church's rule or canon under which it lives.

Secondly, talk of 'a biblical view of marriage' presumes that we can talk about a coherent view through the Bible on marriage. An alternative approach is to speak of several (if not many) biblical views on marriage. Thus one might discuss the Bible's approval of polygamy (e.g. 1 Chronicles 3:1-5) or of marriage as a resolution of rape (e.g. Deuteronomy 22:28-29) or the possibility that incest is sometimes okay (e.g. Abraham and Sarah's story). Certainly there is diverse, varied material on marriage and marriages in the Bible. Some passages are excruciating to our way of thinking in the 21st century. Yet care needs to be taken that we read the Bible as the Holy Scripture of the Church. To overemphasise diversity of biblical material on marriage to the point of denying the possibility of a coherent biblical view of marriage questions whether we are receiving Scripture as God's revelation to us. The challenge of biblical hermeneutics is to find the coherent voice of God through the range of material lying between Genesis 1:1 and Revelation 22:21.

Since Holy Scripture is centred on Christ as its author, we look to Christ's own view of marriage as we seek a biblical view of marriage. First, Christ accepted marriage between a man and a woman as social normality, utilising talk of marriage in sayings and parables, and participating in a notable wedding (Cana, John 2). Secondly, we note that Christ endorsed the possibility of not being married

as a valid style of life for his disciples (later affirmed by Paul, 1 Corinthians 7). In ways which challenge contemporary talk about 'Christian family values', Christ distanced himself from his own family and encouraged his disciples to love him to the point of 'hating' their own families.

Specific teaching given by Jesus about marriage was occasioned by questions posed about divorce and remarriage. On marriage itself, Jesus affirmed that God, having made humanity 'male and female' joins a man and a woman together in marriage as one flesh, a bond which once made no human should break. In this affirmation Jesus takes up through citation the language of Genesis' creation accounts, from chapters one and two (Genesis 1:27; 2:24). In other words, marriage is a man and a woman sexually uniting in a permanent, faithful relationship which establishes a new family.

Later in the epistles, Paul will continue the direction of this theology of marriage. First, in a critique of prostitution (1 Corinthians 6:16 directly citing Genesis 2:24) which is effectively a critique of all sexual liaisons outside of marriage. Secondly, in practical advice for married couples, including advice about avoiding separation and divorce (1 Corinthians 7). Notable here is the manner in which Paul consciously builds on the teaching of Jesus (1 Corinthians 7:10). Thirdly, in Ephesians 5:25-32, where Paul manages both to direct husbands to love their wives (as Christ loved the Church) and to teach the Church of Christ's deep love for it. In a brilliant exegetical twist, Paul takes Genesis 2:24, the foundation of his teaching on marriage, and applies it to the 'mystery' of Christ's relationship to the Church.

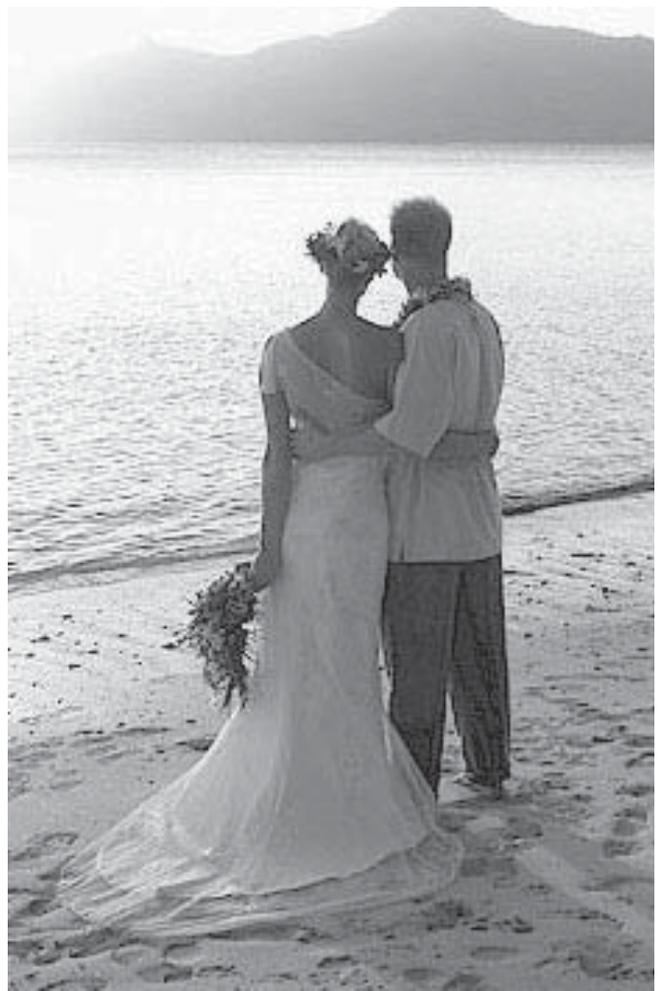
Thus in the teaching of Jesus and Paul on marriage we see a coherent biblical theology of marriage as each appropriates the foundational texts of Genesis 1 and 2, and as Paul appropriates the teaching of Jesus.

But, we might object, was not the foundational theology of marriage in Genesis 1 and 2 observed more in the breech when various polygamous marriages were made, both by patriarchs and kings? Indeed. But the New Testament is the lens through which the Church receives and understands the Old Testament. Rightly Christians wonder how God tolerated polygamy in ancient Israel, but we do not find any NT endorsement of it as a variant biblical possibility for marriage.

A vexed question in relation to a biblical view of marriage is the question of divorce. Is divorce permissible for Christians? Can a new marriage after divorce occur as a blessed event? Or, as some

argue, is a new ‘marriage’ after divorce not in fact a marriage but a continuing adulterous affair? Space does not permit engaging here with this and other questions raised by divorce in respect of applying the Bible to modern life. But it does permit two observations. The clarity we find in Jesus and Paul’s affirmation of what marriage is and should be, is not quite as clear in regard to divorce (Matthew 5:31-32, 19:3-12; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18; 1 Corinthians 7:7-13). However the slight lack of clarity regarding ‘exceptions’ should not be understood as some kind of fog out of which we may proceed in any direction which suits life in modern times. Secondly, we should not confuse how we pastorally respond to the breakdown of a marriage with a biblical view of marriage. The fact of divorce does not change our vows. We vow to marry till parted by death, not by divorce.

The question of gay ‘marriage’ lies before us. It is not contemplated in the Bible which is resolutely ‘heteronormative’. Neither Jesus nor Paul, when we take their reception of the OT seriously, would have contemplated endorsing the possibility of gay ‘marriage.’ In my experience of debate over gay ‘marriage’ there is not, in the end, a serious effort being made to develop a biblical view of marriage which is inclusive of gay ‘marriage.’ Serious theological work evokes support from reason, experience, science, and an historical analysis of the Church’s shifting views on marriage (e.g. over whether or not potential for child-bearing continues to be a requirement for marriage). To the extent that the Bible is engaged in such discourse, there is invocation of certain details in the biblical narrative (e.g. emphasising marriage being for companionship), or attempt to render a biblical view of marriage as incoherent (e.g. there are multiple views which keep changing), or emphasis on a biblical view of inclusiveness. What we do not find, for fairly obvious reasons, is an attempt to develop a biblical view of marriage beginning from Genesis 1 and 2, working through Jesus’ teaching and Paul’s, which affirms that it is immaterial to such a



view what gender the two participants in such a coupling are.

A biblical view of marriage, understood as a view formed through reading the whole of the Bible as the Church’s Holy Scripture, affirms that God, having made humanity ‘male and female’, joins a man and a woman together in marriage as one flesh, a bond which once made no human should break.

The Reverend Dr Peter Carrell

Director of Education in the Diocese of Christchurch and Director of Theology House, Christchurch

The storm before the calm: living with Job



The story of Job raises issues that challenge us. This WIT seminar offers some perspectives on this biblical book, grounded in real-life situations, and a chance to put into practice some of the ideas on pastoral care in a workshop session. It is aimed at those who sit alongside anyone who is hurting, and those who try to make sense of suffering, in sermons or in conversations.

10.00 am - 3.30 pm. Bring a Bible & your lunch.

Saturday 13 October, St. Mark’s Church, Carterton
 Saturday 27 October, St. John’s Church, Feilding
 Saturday 3 November, Anglican Centre, Wellington

Be fruitful...



²⁷So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

The first creation account in Genesis links the creation of humankind as male and female with the divine command to be fruitful and multiply. Human beings were to populate the earth in order to care for it and for the other creatures which inhabited it. Many centuries after the writing down of the creation stories, the *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP) began its account of the causes for which Matrimony was ordained with 'first, it was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name'. An essential part of marriage, so people were taught, was having children. Some commentators see this as one of the reasons why marriage must be between a man and a woman, because that is the combination needed for the conception of a child.

Later still, those who put together the marriage liturgies in *A New Zealand Prayer Book* (ANZPB) took a slightly different track. 'Marriage is given to provide the stability necessary for family life, so that children may be cared for lovingly and grow to full maturity.' (First Form) 'In marriage, husband and wife belong together, providing mutual support and a stability in which their children may grow.' (Third Form) Notice the subtle shift? Marriage was no longer primarily about the procreation of children: the emotional, spiritual and physical union of the couple is more important, and it is the long-term raising (rather than the begetting) of children that is discussed.

This does two things. The emphasis on the caring for children within a family admits the possibility that those children may not necessarily be the biological offspring of the couple: adoption, fostering, step-children are tacitly included, as is the prospect of a same-sex couple raising children together. Those who live in these situations can see themselves included, and this is good news. The second consequence of a reduced emphasis on the bearing of children is that it speaks more directly to those who, by virtue of age, infertility, or other responsibilities, are entering into a marriage where there are unlikely to be offspring. Many of the couples I marry, for example, are older and past their child-bearing years.

But what happens to the divine imperative of fruitfulness in such cases? As psychoanalyst Erik Erikson noted, there are other means of generativity. 'Generativity', as he described it, is a concern for establishing and guiding the next generation. The important thing is a desire to give back, to the people one knows and loves, or to the community at large. It's about leaving behind some sort of legacy. Children are of course one way of doing this, but there are many others. Socially-valued work, planting a tree or a garden, writing a book, or guiding disciples are also expressions of generativity.

Behind the teaching on the nature of marriage in both the *BCP* and *ANZPB* is the idea that it should not be inwardly-focused: the couple is not merely gazing into each other's eyes but also (in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's lovely phrase) 'looking outward together in the same direction'. Generativity in all its many forms is the consequence of this outward focus, an acknowledgement of what a marriage can produce. To my wedding couples I describe it like this, "How will the world be different because you two are married?"

Canon Deborah Broome

Refined and redefined



Richard and Mildred Loving in 1965

Back in the early 1970s, we had a really bad American television game show called *The Dating Game*. The typical format was a single woman asking a series of questions of three single men. She could not see them, and vice versa. At the end of the show, she would choose one of the men to go on a date with.

I can recall being puzzled because the participants would either be all white or all African-American. I could not understand why they did not have white and African-American people on the show together. I was about eight at the time, and I was too young to comprehend that interracial relationships were socially unacceptable in some places. And I certainly did not know that some countries actually had laws forbidding marriages between people of different races.

In 1958, Virginia newlyweds Richard and Mildred Loving had their home raided by police (who hoped to catch them *in flagrante delicto*) at night, and they were arrested for breaking the Racial Integrity Act, which forbade interracial marriage. They pleaded guilty, and were sentenced to one year in prison, with the sentence suspended for 25 years on condition that the couple left the state of Virginia. The trial Judge Leon Bazile wrote:

“Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, Malay, and red, and placed them on separate continents, and but for the interference with his arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend the races to mix.”

The Lovings took their case all the way to the US Supreme Court, and in 1967, it ruled in their favour, and declared bans on interracial marriage to be unconstitutional.

But there are still ultra conservative Christians who believe interracial marriage is wrong. They cite texts like Genesis 28:1, where Isaac blesses Jacob, and instructs him to not take a Canaanite wife; and Numbers 25:6-11, which tells of the terrible fate of an Israelite man and his Midianite wife. This is selective

reading, for the Bible also has many examples of cultures mixing. The Book of Joshua tells how Rahab, a woman of Jericho, helped the Israelites capture that city. Rahab and her family later joined the Israelite people. Ruth, a Moabite, married Boaz, an Israelite. And their great-grandson, David, married Bathsheba, a Hittite woman, but not before committing adultery with her, getting her pregnant and arranging the death of her husband.

Of course, the validity of interracial marriages is but one aspect of matrimonial law that has changed over the years, but I have dwelt on it at some length, because it is an excellent example of how our understanding of marriage has been refined and redefined in modern times. There are other subjects I could have focussed on. One is multi-partner marriages. This is not uncommon in the Older Testament: in the supposed words of a Sunday School student, “King Solomon had 300 wives and 700 porcupines. . . .”. Multi-partner marriage is still practised in many parts of the world today, although widely condemned in the western world. But there are those who are seriously calling for the legalisation of ‘polyamorous’ marriage; and there are also those who would cynically suggest this would be a restoration of ‘biblical’ marriage. And then there is divorce. This was strictly forbidden by the Church for many years, and it was not that long ago that being a divorcee carried a strong social stigma. But now, secular society – and the Anglican Church - have accepted that marriages can and do fail.

Marriage as an institution predates the Church, and throughout human history it has been refined and redefined to fit the social requirements and moral codes of the day. At some times – such as during the liberalisation of divorce in the western world a few decades ago – it has been the subject of considerable controversy, and we are once again in such a time.

So as we consider issues including (but not limited to) same sex relationships, we should remember marriage has been refined and redefined throughout human history. There will be theological arguments put forward that both support and oppose the latest moves to redefine it, and we should be concentrating on them, and not be sidetracked by the red herring of redefinition, because redefinition itself is not the issue. And by spending the time it is currently spending in prayer and contemplation on these issues, the Anglican Church is actually participating in the continuing evolution of our oldest human institution, instead of sitting back and waiting to see what happens.

Darryl Ward

Let's not bother with all this wedding hoo-ha

In the days when the only choices to marry were either the church or the registry office, the marriage service began by proclaiming that the couple were marrying 'in the sight of God and in the face of the congregation'¹. In those times, when Christianity was the dominating culture of our society, it was said that (Christian) marriage was a covenant to which there are three parties, a man, a woman and God.

It's not that marriage has changed, or Christians' views of marriage have changed, but the status of Christianity has changed. Christianity is no longer the dominant culture in our country. And people have come to understand that major life transitions can be celebrated in a number of ways, with or without a representative of the church. Now, 'going to the chapel' is just one, and rapidly becoming one of the least popular ways by census, of celebrating an agreement to share life together.

For those who come to be married, the church that our faith community attend week by week, and cares for, where the community prays in good times and bad, where the word is broken open and proclaimed, and the Eucharist celebrated, becomes a 'wedding venue' with the focus being the bride walking up the aisle.

When the entrance is made, and the vows read, the wedding party and the congregation politely wait for us to finish the readings and prayers that accompany the marriage service, so that they can get on with the party.

We very rarely marry people who are part of a faith community, or who believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Mostly we marry people who like the church, be it the building or the institution, or both.

The public discussion of the Marriage (Definition of Marriage) Amendment Bill has not shown a great deal of sympathy for Christians or the Christian view of marriage. A good example appeared recently in the 'NZ Herald'.

'In fact marriage is a civil institution which the churches have tried to appropriate fully unto themselves. No one is asking the churches to 'sanctify' (or whatever it is they think they do) gay marriages: they can

*continue to wallow in their ancient bigotry and intolerance for as long as they wish and render themselves even more irrelevant.'*²

As the status of the church changes, and the Christian view of marriage becomes more and more counter cultural, we do ourselves more and more of a disservice marrying all comers, or anyone at all.

The legal opinion provided to the 'Family First' organisation by Barrister Ian Bassett³ states that marriage celebrants will be in breach of the Human Rights Act 1993, if they refuse to supply services to a couple seeking to be married, underlines the dangers that we currently face in providing venues for marriages. Given Christian understandings of marriage, Christian celebrants find it ethically inappropriate to preside at the marriage of some couples, for example a marriage of convenience for immigration purposes, or a couple who clearly do not understand the nature of marriage or the contract they are entering into. For many Christian celebrants marrying a same sex couple is equally inappropriate.⁴

We ministers of the church should give up the status of marriage celebrant.

Rather, we can preside at liturgies that celebrate the legal agreement that has already, or is about to happen (in the registry office) In our liturgy we can honestly speak and preach about our beliefs about marriage, we can pray, we can break open and proclaim the word, and we can celebrate the Eucharist.

A service like this is far more a celebration of the God who we worship and the proclamation of our beliefs, rather than the unsatisfactory provision of, and presiding over, a venue for a bride's 'special day'.

Reverend Jenny Chalmers

¹ The Sorter Prayer Book p121

² Hopkins J., 'Sign of the times or time to redesign marriage' NZ Herald 31 August

³ <http://www.protectmarriage.org.nz> accessed 15 September

⁴ As it happens, not for me. I would far rather marry the gay couple who worship Sunday by Sunday in the church in which I serve and whose conversations show a depth of profound belief, than the fifteen or so bridal couples who will invariably seek to be married in St Marks this year, who will have little or no understanding of our Christian beliefs.

Contact details

The Wellington Library is located based on the first floor of the Anglican Centre, 18 Eccleston Hill (off Hill Street), Thorndon, Wellington. Contact Director Deborah Broome at 04 4759085 or debroome@paradise.net.nz. Or contact Librarian John McCaul at 04 4718599 or WITLibrary@wn.ang.org.nz. The Palmerston North Library is located at St. Peter's Church, 229 Ruahine St, Palmerston North. Correspondence should be addressed to the WIT Council, c/o the Anglican Centre.

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