

I BELIEVE IN CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

MARTIN CAMROUX

This is a sermon about marriage. Just as marriage is not for everyone this sermon therefore is not for everyone either. There must be some of you who have never married, and don't intend to get married. As one lady once said, "Marriage may be a wonderful institution, I just don't want to be in an institution". So I'll just have to ask you to bear with me on this one.

For me one of the wonderful things about being minister of this church is the number of weddings that I do. It's wonderful to be able to share the happiness you get on a wedding today. Once last year carried away by enthusiasm I kissed the bride. And the groom said, "I'm so happy I could kiss you myself". I was carried away but not carried away. "I'd rather you didn't, if you don't mind". But the happiness of a wedding is infectious. I am personally convinced that for many their wedding day is the best day's work they'll ever do in their whole lives.

Today marriage is facing a time of change and challenge. Fewer people are marrying than ever before – the number now is only half what it was 30 years. Many people live together and 40% of children are born outside marriage. And when people do get married fewer marriages last. There is now one divorce for every two marriages, and Britain has the highest divorce rate in the European Union. I don't take any of that lightly. But I want today, if I can, to give a positive message about marriage.

Firstly 50% of marriages fail. That is tragic. The trauma of divorce can be shattering. But let's not idealise the past. Think of the world of Jane Austen. Why was marriage really like then? Jane Austen wrote, "Poverty is a great evil but I would rather be a teacher at a school (and I can think of nothing worse) than marry a man I did not like". Think of Charlotte who marries Mr. Collins. What kind of marriage was that? Claire Tomlin comments "Austen allows that Charlotte is making what is for her a reasonable decision in buying herself a social position as a married woman, escaping the humiliations of a dependent daughter at home in exchange for sexual and domestic services".

In the past you got married because socially it was very difficult to do anything else. Once married if you were a woman you had little choice but to stay because you could not afford to be on your own. Legally it was difficult to get a divorce. Marriage really was for better, or for worse for life.

Today it is not like that at all. Socially no-one cares if you get married or not. When I see couples for marriages one of the questions I often ask them is "why do you want to get married – why don't you just go on living together". It's not that I'm suggesting this is a good idea. I simply know that most couples live together before marriage and there is no need for them to get married at all. Today if you get married it is a choice

And when you do get married there is very little to keep you together except your own commitment to each other. The social pressure keeping couples together has almost evaporated. Women are economically independent. Legally divorce is now quite simple. In

the preparation for this service I was checking on the Internet how many divorces there now are. And one of those adverts popped up – for quick and easy divorce.com. “Welcome to quick.e divorce. In under 5 minutes you can have everything you need to be able to conduct your own divorce at home for just £30”. Modern western society is the first ever to base marriage almost solely on the state of the feelings we have for each other. It is like walking along a tight-rope - many couples are going to fall off.

The point however is this – in a time when no-one needs to get married every year 150,000 couples choose freely to get married for the first time. In a time when nothing is holding couples together except their own commitment – half of those marriages last. And 30% of those who get divorced marry again and in my experience frequently find everything in that second marriage which they had hoped to find in their first.

There must be something that’s leading so many still to choose marriage, and something that many are still finding in it. I suppose you could be a cynic. The statistics are that married live people longer than single people; are financially better off and psychologically more stable. However I have to say that in my experience those statistics have got nothing whatsoever to do with motivates the couples I see!

Said Jesus, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh". That I think is more the heart of it. Marriage is a way of committing yourself to a loving partnership where two become so close they one flesh.

I don't agree with everything Paul said about marriage – he was a man of his time not ours – but in Ephesians he says, “husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself”. There are times in a marriage when the two of you are close that that is true. As the American Ann Bradstreet felt when she wrote of her husband “If ever two were one, then surely we”.

At the heart of marriage is a commitment by two people to each other. It can be made anywhere. If two people took it alone on a hillside I would regard that as morally valid. But we take it here to church, in the presence of God, before our friends, to emphasise that it is the most solemn commitment we could possibly make.

Of course it is a very difficult commitment to keep. I rather like the comment of Billy Graham's wife who on being asked if she'd ever thought of divorce said, "Divorce. No, never. Murder, yes". When you get married you never know what is coming. Marriage may bring not health but sickness, not riches but poverty, and these will test the frail love which the husband and wife had at the start. Sexual attraction may come and go just as health and happiness come and go. Few people are untested by the experience. The story is told of the minister who was taking a service "Will you take this woman to be your wife, forsaking most others". If that was the promise it might be easier. As it is it's difficult. We make mistakes, we hurt each other. We drift apart. Sometimes marriages fail and there is nothing you can do but admit the fact. But half of marriages stay together. And sometimes they gloriously succeed. And sometimes those who've had to struggle find they're glad they stayed together. And often those who failed once find another day when their life comes together in a way they never dreamed it could.

The basic truth is we are creatures made for loving. We find our origin in the love of God. The best part of our lives is when we love others. As Robert Southwell said, “Not where I

breathe, I live, but where I love". A deep committed loving partnership will always be the most profound way that finds fulfilment.

Years ago Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote: -

"In its long history mankind has tried every conceivable experiment with the sex relationship...out of this long experimenting there has arisen the great tradition: a man and a woman loving each other so much that they do not care to love anybody else in the same way at all, and so building a permanent home that puts around the children the strong security of an unbroken affection".

That's the heart of marriage. No other kind of relationship can give children what a loving family can. No other form of relationship can offer such deep personal fulfilment. Any of us who have had the good fortune to be part of a family of that kind know how much we owe to it. When my own children grow up I can hope for nothing better for them than that they find that kind of relationship.

Said Jesus "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be one with his wife and the two shall become one flesh". I believe in Christian marriage. The shape of it is changing. We are feeling our way towards a new kind of marriage. Marriage is ceasing to be a power relationship between two unequal persons. Increasingly it is now a freely entered a relationship between two persons who want to create a life together, share sexual pleasure, work in concert for the economic well-being of the family unit, and be partners in planning their older years together. It will not be for everyone but it will continue to be the most powerful way of expressing the deepest kind of loving of which we are capable. Christian marriage has a great future ahead of it.

*Rev'd. Martin Camroux MA
Trinity Church, Sutton
(United Reformed/Methodist)
Cheam Road, Sutton, SM1 1DZ*