

Sunday 23rd July 2017 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		7th Sunday after Pentecost Series on 1 Corinthians (Part 2)
Genesis 2:7, 18-25	Ps 128	1 Corinthians 7:1-6, 10-16
		Matthew 19:1-6
CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE		

“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” (Matt 19:5; Gen 2:24)

INTRODUCTION

We begin today with Part 2 of our series on the first letter of St Paul to the Corinthian church – the series that we began in February this year. We shall be exploring some difficult and controversial issues, topics, today and in the next few weeks: Christian Marriage; Singleness (widows/widowers; divorce, single parents, singles); Homosexuality; Sexual boundaries and holiness: Permissible but not beneficial: appropriate sexual behaviour. Uncomfortable topics. Controversial. Relevant.

DIVERSE RELATIONSHIPS, DIVERSE ETHICS

All of us are products of a relationship, whether permanent or temporary, between a man and a woman. Most of us were born, we are here today, because two people came together, conceived a child, and nine months later, this amazing baby emerged! The coming together of two people, to form a new relationship and in due time to produce children is as old as humankind. The family that is formed by this relationship becomes the incubator for the children, the environment in which they grow and are nurtured.

From the time of our birth, we are in relationship – initially with our mother or caregiver; and then increasingly with the wider family and community. Our families – parents, brothers and sisters, and in due

time children, grandchildren, cousins, uncles and aunts, are very important to us all.

And yet the word “family” means different things for different people. Within any community, including within the church, there will be a very diverse experience of family life and families. Certainly there will be husband and wife with child or children. But there will also be single parents, children being raised by grandparents, child-headed households, step-parents, blended families (as partners with children from previous relationships form a new family), those who are divorced (and sometimes remarried), couples living together outside of marriage; people living on their own. Is this diversity a good thing? Is it a sign of brokenness? Is it a sign of empowerment and choice? What, in the light of all this, is the place of Christian marriage? These are all big questions.

And for young people hitting puberty and the teenage years, the fun – or the nightmare - begins! Our relationships of love and affection and sexual intimacy occupy a great deal of our energy and time. The picture is often sadly one of short-term, temporary, shallow relationships - bedhopping, multiple partners, one night stands, promiscuous behaviour, betrayal, hurt, deceit, a mixture of *Shades of Gray* and *Grey's Anatomy* – main chicks and side chicks, every car needing its spare wheel, playing at home and away...

There are other questions to ask. Does God give us an unchanging, universal ethic, applicable for all time and for all people, across the ages? To what extent do the norms of society impact on how we interpret scripture? How do we respond to situations and experiences that were not part of the experience of the early church, or the community and faith tradition that produced the Bible? We have seen big shifts, for example, in the liberation of slaves (yet slavery was condoned and accepted in the scriptures), in the role and ministry of women in society and in the life of the church (yet for some, women in leadership is against the teaching of the Bible); and in the place of gays and lesbians in the Christian community. Civil unions (between people of the same gender) are legal in SA and in a number of other

countries. Churches are generally unsure how to respond pastorally and appropriately to this. Should marriage, Christian marriage, now include those of the same gender? Should we bless civil unions? Conduct same sex weddings? We are increasingly aware of Christians who identify as being gay, or lesbian, or transgender - the LGBTI++ community - including those facing personal questions of gender identity.

Where, in the light of all this, is the place of Christian marriage?

FAITHFULNESS & STABILITY WITHIN MARRIAGE (1 Cor 7:1-6, 10-16)

One way we engage with these matters is in the reading and interpretation of scripture. The church's traditional teaching on marriage is rooted in our understanding of Genesis; the teaching of Christ; and the teaching of St Paul.

Paul addresses fornication and promiscuity in 1 Cor 6; in ch 7 he writes about stability and faithfulness in marriage.

7:1-6

Vv 1 – 2

“Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: ‘It is good for a man not to touch a woman.’ But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.”

It appears that in Corinth, under the guise of spiritual “freedom”, some Corinthian men were visiting prostitutes, having affairs outside marriage – “All things are lawful for me” – (6:12-20); others were withdrawing from sexual relations with their wives, even within marriage – perhaps in an effort to become wise, to discipline their bodies and so apparently be free – so they thought - to pursue wisdom.

There was the belief amongst some that to remain celibate – single, unmarried, without a partner - was the path to greater holiness and wisdom. Paul does not support this. Paul refuses to allow the practice of the celibate elite to be imposed as the rule. And he does not impose his own preference for celibacy and singleness on people, either (7:6-7). Singleness, and marriage, are both a particular gift from God (7:7)

“This is one of a number of cases where Paul insists upon legitimate diversity and the recognition of real difference within the church...harmony and group cohesion are attained by fostering the diversity which comes from the Spirit, not by the imposition of uniformity.”¹

He acknowledges (7:32 – 35) that the married man or woman is naturally anxious about how to please his or her spouse, and he wants people to be free of anxieties – so Paul suggests that “he who marries... does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do better” (7:38). But at the same time he encourages marriage, and sexual relations within marriage: “each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband” (v 2), so as to avoid sexual immorality.

And so he says (7:5)

“Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” Paul is fully aware of the sexual longings and needs of men and women, and encourages them in their married state.

Paul gives husband and wife equal status in the relationship – equal authority over one another’s bodies (7:4) – he is not promoting patriarchy or hierarchy, but rather the reverse!

¹ Barton, SC “1 Corinthians” in Dunn and Rogerson (eds) *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, 2003. 1328-9

And he is not “anti-sex” – he gives frank recognition of the importance of the sexual relation for the maintenance of marriage.

Key issues: faithfulness; self-control; commitment to one’s spouse; not having multiple partners; not having a series of casual, temporary relationships.

7:10-16

7:10

“To the married I give this command... that the wife should not separate from her husband... and that the husband should not divorce his wife.”

Keep to the marriage. As far as possible, don’t separate or divorce.

This is qualified (7:15) – “if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so...” There are situations when a partner chooses to walk away, or behaviour such as abuse or unfaithfulness destroys the marriage relationship. Marriages do end and sometimes they need to be ended.

7:14

“For the unbelieving partner is made holy through his/her believing spouse... and their children are holy.”

The believing spouse is a channel of God’s grace and love into his or her family.

The virtue of stability in our relationships: “let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you” (7:17) – married, widowed, single.

Paul is not presenting “marriage and family life” as *the* way to live as Christians in the world. Singleness is an option for Christians. What

Paul is saying is that “exceptional times require exceptional circumstances.... What is important ... is wholehearted and responsible commitment to the Lord...”²

“Paul presents and suggests a number of options... he does not give a systematic theology of singleness and marriage... he gives practical guidance... to encourage the Corinthians to act both freely and responsibly ... in ways which will sustain them in a holy common life...”³

CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

The picture of Genesis is reflected and emphasized in the teaching of Jesus: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen 2:24; Mark 10:7).

Christian marriage is...

A lifelong union

Vows before God and the church

Receive the grace and blessing of God to help them fulfil their vows

It is intended to be a relationship of stability, love, faithfulness, security, trust, growth, support, vulnerability, openness.

I make a call for a renewal of marriage and family life amongst us all as the people of God; we should not view marriage as an optional extra, not really necessary, but rather as a very great gift, given for our good. There is so much badmouthing of marriage – abuse and violence; hierarchy and control; power and dominance; trapped and imprisoned; domestic slavery, divorce and scandal; public and glamorised unfaithfulness amongst high profile people – all of which is used by people to say that marriage is bad, dangerous, a failed institution, outdated.

² Barton, SC “1 Corinthians” in Dunn and Rogerson (eds) *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, 2003. 1328-9

³ Barton, SC “1 Corinthians” in Dunn and Rogerson (eds) *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, 2003. 1330

And many people argue that “we don’t need marriage: - they are single by choice or circumstance, yet with children; we have many wonderful, caring single parents, especially single mothers; many cope and survive and flourish, yet are not part of the traditional family structure.

I think that we are in danger of losing something very important and valuable. There is growing awareness of the harm done to children by an absent parent – usually the dad, but in some cases, the mother. Our children need both parents, as far as possible. There is a great deal to suggest that many of the problems we face as a society are due to broken families, absent parents. It is up to each young person – what sort of relationship do I want, for my life? Is there a better alternative? It is up to each of us, whatever our age or marital status, to nurture those around us, to be icons of love and stability and trust.

What about the LGBTI++ community? Are they excluded from all this? What about the transgender community? What about those who long for a committed, faithful relationship, with children, yet are in a same sex relationship?

We cannot walk away from these realities. Our brothers and sisters. How do we embrace, include, welcome, and not reject, exclude? Some churches would rather not even talk about these things; some churches have agreed to bless same sex marriages, conduct blessings of same sex couples. How do we embrace lesbian women in the townships who are victims of corrective rape? How do parents respond when their son or daughter comes out as gay or lesbian? Do we reject, throw them out? Do we love and embrace and accept? We are left with more questions than answers.

CONCLUSION

Let our yardstick, our measuring rod, be that of love. Deep love, that cares deeply, that gives unconditionally, that embraces without judgement.

Let our attitudes to those who are different be full of grace and love.

May God help us and give us grace in our friendships, in our families, in our marriages, in our intimate relationships.

© Andrew Hunter
July 2017