



The Seven Sacraments

Marriage

22 January 2017

Michael Reiss

Ecclesiastes 3: 1–11 1 Peter 1: 3–12

CS Lewis somewhere complains about how, when he once had rather bad toothache, a friend with whom he was staying insisted on reading out loud passages from Lewis' book *The Problem of Pain*. As someone who is married, I feel somewhat similarly, preaching about marriage. It would be much safer if I preached about the world to come, the duties of a US President or the university's North West Cambridge Development. Fortunately, Jenny, to whom I am married, is unable to be here, so you won't be able to quiz her, after the service, about the correspondence between what I say about marriage and what I am in my marriage.

As at least some of you will know, for the first five hundred or more years of the Church's history, marriage was considered a civil institution and the Church played no role in the ceremony. Gradually that changed and in the 12th century, the Western Church defined marriage as one of the sacraments; hence, its inclusion in this set of addresses on the seven sacraments. And yet, of course, the Christian churches have had somewhat mixed views about marriage.

At one extreme, we have the belief that marriage is second best, that the person whose life is focused on God has no time for such things. As Paul puts it cheerfully in I Corinthians 7: 8–9: 'I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn.' Now, all of us have days when we feel a bit like that and Paul did think that the world would soon be ending so his mind was fixed less on the now than on the hereafter. Still, it's a remarkable passage for someone born and brought up in the Jewish faith where for an adult not to get married and produce children was seen as failure.

At the other extreme, we have the view that marriage is indissoluble, that, as I have already noted, it is a sacrament and that, as I generally mention in my marriage sermons to newly-wed couples, "in a mysterious way, your marriage has the potential to reveal something of God's nature to the world".

I am a biologist by background so let me mention some mainstream evolutionary biology. We know a tremendous amount about why, to use the language that some would reserve to humans, in some animal species polygamy is the norm, in others it's promiscuity, in others monogamy, and in still others other mating patterns prevail. In the

biological world, individuals do what is best for their own interests which, by and large, means having offspring that will survive and, in turn, have offspring themselves. For evolutionary biologists, humans have a natural tendency towards monogamy, as trying to bring up children on one's own too often in our evolutionary past led to failure. Of course, this monogamy may be serial and, in societies with high levels of inequality, some individuals do better, biologically speaking, with other arrangements, such as polygamy.

So, that's a shorthand account of what is the case but what ought to be the case and why?

For many Christians and I count myself amongst those who see the world like this, life exists on two planes – the natural and the supernatural. But the supernatural isn't kept distinct from the natural; rather, as Orthodox Christianity emphasises, the supernatural continually infuses the natural. One sees something of this in the work of certain artists. I think of the drawings and engravings of Samuel Palmer and the paintings of Stanley Spencer where the everyday, whether an apple tree or an oast house, is infused with the reality of the transcendent. Poetry too sometimes captures this – consider Wordsworth's *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

Just as in the Communion Service the bread and the wine become the body and blood of Christ, so a marriage between two people is an enacted symbol of the relationship between Christ and his Church – and that is why a marriage either cannot be or should not be dissolved. There are consequences for the fabric of space-time.

Now, let me be clear. I firmly support standard British divorce law but a divorce indicates that something, somewhere, has gone very wrong. Furthermore, the New Testament teaching about sexual relationships is more radical than is sometimes supposed. As Paul puts it in I Corinthians 6: 16–18:

Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with them in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit. Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body.

In other words, whatever the laws about divorce, there are indissoluble consequences to any sexual relationship. Of course, the New Testament has much about forgiveness, repentance and starting afresh, but even in such circumstances there are certain consequences, for oneself and for the other, that cannot fully be undone.

Let me turn to more positive teaching about marriage. Marriage, of course, is not only about sexual faithfulness, it's about providing a home for the next generation should there be children to bring up and it's about mutual companionship between a couple. Indeed, when a marriage goes well, the companionship that can exist within it can make one a better person. Along with being a parent and enjoying a deep friendship, it's a relationship in which one can put someone else's interests ahead of one's own and then find, wonderfully, that having cast one's bread upon the waters, it does indeed return to one, pressed down, shaken together and running over.

And this is one of the ways in which the connections between the relationship between two married people, whether of the same sex or not, and Christ's relationship with his Church or God's relationship with the world are seen. The natural is indeed infused with the supernatural.

Let me end with a more quotidian example of married life. A couple were Christmas shopping. The shopping centre was packed and the wife found that her husband was nowhere to be seen. Irritated at first, because of all the last-minute shopping that needed to be done, she then began to be worried and called him on her mobile phone, got through and asked him where he was.

In a quiet voice he said, "Do you remember that jewellers we went into about five years ago, where you fell in love with that diamond necklace that we couldn't afford, and I told you that I would get it for you one day?" The wife found herself choking up and starting to cry but managed to say, "Yes, I do remember that shop." "Well," he replied, "I'm in the pub next door."