

Ephesians 5:22-32, Little Stretton 8/2/09

(Read also Genesis 2: 18 –25 Mark 10: 2-9)

This is National Marriage Week and the Rector has asked me to preach from Ephesians 5, the passage that is on the loose slip [the verses are printed out for the congregation].

First may I say I agree with every word that the Rector has written on page 1 of *Church Matters* on the subject of Marriage and I shall be referring to it in a few minutes. . If you haven't read it, please do so - there are copies at the back of the church. Secondly may I express some reluctance to speak on this subject. It reminds me of the Professor who became an "expert" on Family life and lectured every week all over the country. Then he got married and dropped his lectures to one a month. And then they had a child and he lectured only once a quarter; and finally after a second child arrived he stopped lecturing altogether!

But it is a most important subject and we shall look to see what St Paul says about it. He was writing in a world where men had a very dominant role. In the Judaism of his time, a wife was in many ways the property of her husband. She couldn't divorce him, but he could divorce her. One Jewish prayer, said by a man, thanked the Lord that he had not been made me "a Gentile, a slave, or a woman" Even Roman law was more enlightened than this, and women could in certain circumstances divorce their husbands..

Paul like our Lord (Mark 10: 2-9) goes back to the first principles of creation which we find in the early chapters of Genesis, where there is a far more equal partnership and where the graphic term "one flesh" is used, indicating a very close relationship of giving and sharing.

To the modern eye and ear Paul's words at the beginning of our reading may sound very sexist, but in context this is not the case. In earlier parts of the book Paul deals with all Christian relationships – the necessity to maintain unity, to walk in love, and to be subject to the claims of the other person. In the previous verse of this chapter (v.21) he declares: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ", and *then* goes on to say (v.22): "Wives submit your selves to your husbands". He does, however, assert that the husband has the position of headship, but it is not a headship in a dictatorial way but rather in the way that Christ is head of the church. St Peter has a similar passage (1 Peter 3: 1-7) where the husband is clearly the governor of the family, but emphasises the duty of love towards his wife..

St Paul tells the husbands that they must love their wives as Christ loves the church, sacrificing himself completely for her. This is no dictatorial headship, but rather a serving-headship relationship. It is brought out in the modern hymn the Servant King: "From heaven you came helpless babe and gave your life that we might live....so let us learn how to serve and in our lives enthrone him, each other's needs to prefer, for it is Christ we're serving".

This is the role. says Paul, of the husband in the marriage situation and it is the one that God ordained from the beginning. The husband must have:

1. Sacrificial love v. 25
2. A purifying love, v. 26,17
3. A caring love v. 28
4. And finally a unifying love – Husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies. And then Paul uses the term that is both in the Genesis account of creation and in also our Lord's words about marriage – it is a one-flesh relationship. (Mark 10: 8, Ephesians 5: 29-31)

In my understanding Headship does not mean superiority - it means responsibility. As President Truman put it: "The buck stops here.". The Christian pair indicate to the world the relationship between Christ and his people. Different roles but a basic equality! Paul himself makes this clear in his letter to the Corinthians; "The wife does not rule over her body but the husband does and the husband does not rule over his own body but the wife does,." When modernists say Paul puts women down they are going against the facts.

Now clearly this is the God-given ideal. Sadly we don't always live up to it, and in this the innocent as well as the guilty may be caught up. For example a person enters a marriage fully intending to make it a one-flesh relationship for life, as promised in marriage vows, but then the other party breaks the bond time and time again until the situation becomes utterly interoperable.

But because the ideal sometimes fails this is no reason to abandon it. Our Rector has written (Church Matters p. 1 February 2009):

I want to reaffirm marriage because it has been under attack – from the tax system, secularists who say all types of arrangements are equal when all the evidence is that they are not. It has also been under attack from hedonists who say 'Do what you feel', which can mean a betrayal of promises and reversing the Biblical order of relationship, the joy of sex as an express of love, and children brought into that secure relationship.....The Biblical way has stood the test of time and has shown to be the rock as against the sand of other ways.

We must, of course, be aware as we hold up the Christian ideal of life-long marriage that there will always be those who have been unable to find a suitable partner or have been called to the single life, as was St Paul and our Lord himself. But this should not stop us from upholding Christian marriage.

May I conclude by saying that in Christian marriage there are not two partners but three, for we are members of Christ's body and the third partner is Christ himself. Indeed the marriage as God intends it is a picture of Christ and his people – Christ is the bridegroom and we are the bride.

Let us pray:

Almighty Father, thou hast consecrated the state of Matrimony to such an excellent mystery, that in it is signified and represented the spiritual marriage and unity between Christ and his Church; help us so to uphold marriage in our society, both by our example and by our teaching, that many may seek to do thy will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.