

## Marriage: More than Love?

Jodi and I celebrated our 23rd wedding anniversary a few weeks ago, on the 13th of June. I look back to our wedding day all those years ago. I know that I didn't have any idea what married life would be like. I was young, Jodi was much younger. We had experienced so little of life, and we so naïve. We had known no sorrow, little pain. The greatest challenge we had faced was a twelve month separation during our courtship. We were going into this blind, or so it seems now.



And yet, we were beginning a journey that was not ours alone. Across history millions upon millions of men and women had set out along this path, knowing that it was well trodden by those who went before them. As we stood before family, friends, congregation members at St Paul's Lutheran Church Glenelg, in Adelaide, we knew that we had their support and more importantly, their prayers. But more importantly, we were placing ourselves in the embrace of God, in entering into something instituted by him in the creation of the first human beings, Adam and Eve. And this reality has come to mean more and more to me as I learn what it means to be married, through all the ups and downs, the champagne moments and the challenges.

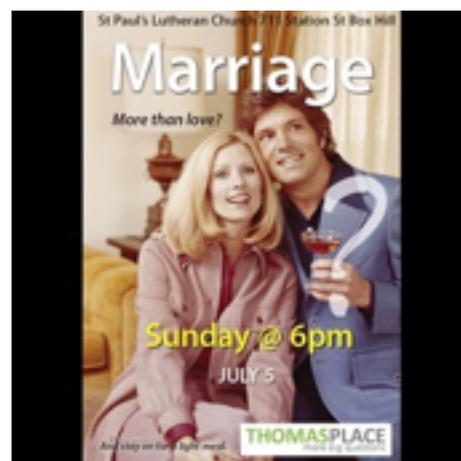
When we got married, Jodi and I didn't realise what an auspicious date June 13 was. Some 467 years before our wedding day, a 41-year-old theologian and former monk married a 26-year-old former nun. The groom's closest friend had spoken against the marriage, calling the decision reckless. Even the groom had said only 18 months earlier: "I shall never take a wife, as I feel at present. Not that I am insensible to my flesh or sex (for I am neither wood nor stone); but my mind is averse to wedlock because I daily expect the death of a heretic." He also said that his mildewed bed was not properly made for months at a time.

Martin Luther and Katherina Von Bora were married on June 13th, 1525, by Luther's good friend and spiritual confidant, Johannes Bugenhagen. The painter Lucas Cranach was among five witnesses to the ceremony, and it is to him that we owe these wedding portraits. From what we know, they had a close and loving marriage. They had six children, four of whom lived into adulthood.



In 1522, some three years before he married, and before the possibility would have even entered his mind, Luther wrote an essay on the *Estate of Marriage*, somewhat unwillingly. He begins this way: "How I dread preaching on the estate of marriage! I am reluctant to do it because I am afraid if I once get really involved in the subject it will make a lot of work for me and for others..." I have to admit to feeling somewhat the same way tonight.

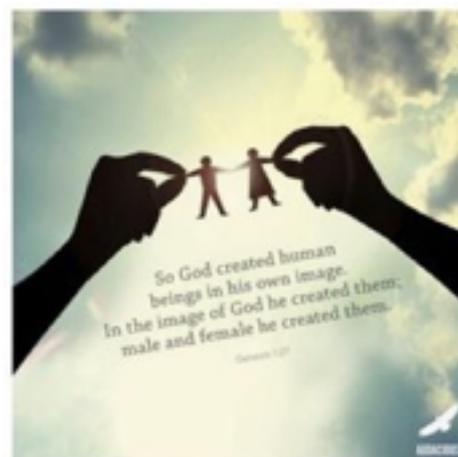
Our theme tonight is *Marriage: more than love?* I wonder how Australian society might answer that question. I expect that most people would see that marriage is founded on the mutual love that a couple share with one another. And yet we also speak of love without marriage. There has been a significant decline in the marriage rate over the last years. Less Australians are marrying, and the rate of de-facto relationships have doubled across all age ranges since 1992. Of those who do marry, 31% were religious ceremonies, down from 58% in 1990.



So is the problem marriage itself? Is it outdated and outmoded? Why commit to a life-long union with someone that has a 40% chance of failure. Why bind yourself to one person sexually when monogamy is not a natural human state? Why place yourself within the confines of an institution when your relationship is personal and private, and the goal is personal fulfilment. It is somewhat intriguing that the Western world find itself in the middle of a passionate debate about same-sex marriage when marriage itself is under constant questioning.

Tonight I want to allow three passages of Scripture to dialogue with us about marriage, at the same time shaping the definition of love with which we should operate when talking about marriage. These verses form part of the Rite of Marriage in the Lutheran Church of Australia.

We start at the beginning, in the book of Genesis. Genesis is about origins. How did everything that exists get here? What are we to do with and in the world that we have been given? How do we relate to each other and to the God who has created us? The hand of God creates everything that exists, and brings order to the newly formed universe. There is light and darkness, sea and dry land, birds and animals, night and day. Creation is binary, but complementary. Finally God reaches the zenith of his creative activity: "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness... So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it."



Male and female, in their equality and yet their complementarity are the building blocks of creation, to which God has given the ability to create new life. Luther calls marriage the first estate: "Married life," he writes in the *Large Catechism*, "is not just to be put on the same level as any other estate in life. It takes the lead and puts all the others in the shade... He created men and women differently (as is obvious) not for indecency, but for them to hold together, be productive, have children and bring them up to God's glory." Luther says this partly in response to the teaching of the medieval church, which placed singleness and the religious vocations above married life. But he contends, and the church still teaches, that marriage has its origin not in the long history of human tradition, but in the command and blessing of God in creation.

In the wedding rite these words follow: "Our Lord Jesus Christ said: Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female', and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother, and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So, they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Jesus is engaged with the Pharisees in a debate about divorce. Moses allowed a husband to divorce his wife simply by writing a certificate of divorce and sending her away, which means literally abandoning her and leaving her without protection or livelihood. The tragedy of this state of affairs is not lost on Jesus, who quotes from the second creation account in Genesis 2.

Marriage creates something new and profound. The Bible uses the phrase "one flesh" which describes the sexual relationship between a husband and a wife, the closest, most intimate form of human interaction. It is blessed by God, both for the pleasure it brings but also for the potentiality of life that it embodies through the possibility of conception. This is the will and the blessing of God, and the seedbed of new life within the community of husband and wife, a new entity separate from those who gave them life, their own parents.

"What God has joined together, let no one separate." Marriage is not simply a private decision, of human will. It is God who joins a man and a woman together. God gives his blessing, not just through procreation, but through mutuality, companionship. Marriage is a human parable of the covenant love of God for his people, Israel, expressed so poignantly through Hosea's words: "I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord."

It's instructive how often God uses sexual imagery to describe how God's people fail to worship and follow him. Disobedience is described in terms of sexual unfaithfulness. This isn't simply a metaphor, but also points to the way that our sexuality is a gift of God, and we are called to honour God with our bodies. Sex has a spiritual side. And marriage is the closest human relationship we can have, and the one in which God wants us to have the nearest experience to the beauty and power of his divine love.

Which leads me to the final passage today, and the final one in the wedding rite, and in many ways the most controversial. It's not my intention to speak about submission, except to say that the passage calls husband and wife to mutual submission. This shouldn't surprise us, because Paul's whole point is that marriage is a window into the divine, an analogy, however imperfect, of the relationship that Christ has with his bride, the church. And how husbands and wives are called to relate to one another is based on the sacrificial love with which Christ loves the church. It's a love stronger than death, forged through the cross. Here each of these statements in connection with the actions of Christ:

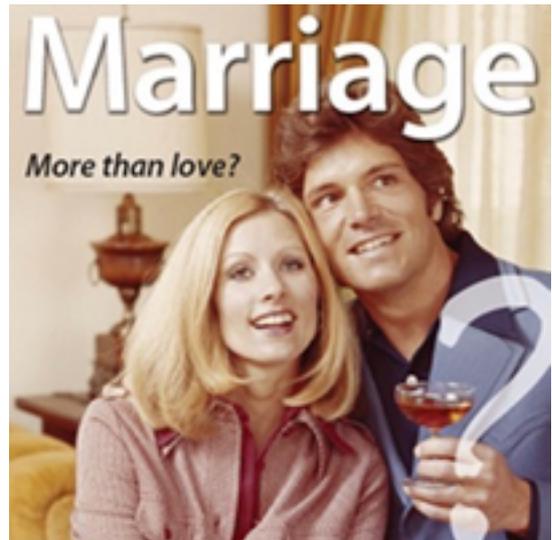


"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ... Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless ... This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However,

each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.”

The bond between man and woman in marriage is a great sign of the union between Christ and his bride, the Church. We see this consummated in Revelation 21, where John writes: “I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.” Marriage is a tangible symbol of the way that God has torn down the dividing wall of hostility erected through the mutual blame session between Adam and Eve. Marriage, then is a sign of the Fall reversed, the new creation, where peace wins out, and where the creation unity between man and woman can be re-established. A recent Roman Catholic statement on marriage puts it this way: “Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and enriched by the redemptive power of Christ ... with the result that the spouses are effectively led to God ... and together render glory to God.”

Marriage. More than love? Well no, but let’s define love. It is all about the love of God: Marriage is not about the kind of wedding day, candlelit dinner, intimate, private, romantic love. Rather, it’s love shaped by the divine command of a loving God expressed in the creation of the first human beings: “in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.” And in that context, of the union of one man and one woman, its love empowered by the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ, “who loved the church and gave himself up for her,” his bride.



I leave the last word to a man married on June 13th: “The world says of marriage, ‘Brief is the joy, lasting the bitterness.’ Let them say what they please; what God wills and creates is bound to be a laughingstock to them. ... Now the ones who recognise the estate of marriage are those who firmly believe that God himself instituted it, brought husband and wife together, and ordained that they should beget children and care for them. For this they have God’s word and they can be certain that it does not lie. They can therefore be certain that the estate of marriage and everything that goes with it in the way of

conduct, works, and suffering is pleasing to God. Now, tell me this, how can the heart have greater good, joy, and delight, than in God, when one is certain that his estate, conduct, and work is pleasing to God.” Amen.