

# On Holy Matrimony

## Presentation to the 2017 Aberdeen & Orkney Diocesan Synod

The task before us is to explore our understanding of Holy Matrimony within the Scottish Episcopal Church, and to consider whether its scope might be widened to include relationships that in the past have been excluded, by both church and state. The motivation for such a widening is understandable: if marriage provides a particular means of support and blessing for its participants, a provision indeed from the very heart of God, then no one should be denied that blessing who is able to receive it.

We are agreed, I am sure, that marriage that functions as God intended is blessed in a way that other relationships are not. The relationship between parent and child is God-given and precious; but even this relationship does not possess those qualities that make marriage so special.

What is it that makes marriage the unique blessing that it is? It is necessary for us to understand this, as best we can. You see, merely re-labelling a relationship and calling it marriage does not in itself make it a marriage, any more than calling a salmon a whale makes it a cetacean. If a relationship is to be a marriage then it must possess those unique attributes that pertain to marriage alone.

Of course, we are free to re-label whatever we wish. We can call a salmon a whale, a mackerel a whale, and do the same for a whole host of other sea creatures. But this will not improve our concept of what it means to be a whale; on the contrary, all it will do is diminish our understanding of what truly makes the various whale species special and unique.

So, I come back to this question: what is it that makes marriage so special? We have no time to explore this in depth, but I believe some points can be made to help us with the answer.

In Genesis 1: 27 we read,

*So God created mankind in his own image,  
In the image of God he created them;  
Male and female he created them. (NIV)*

The NIV lays this out as if it were poetry, and I believe the editors were right to do so. Here we have a typically Hebrew poetic form, in which a truth is first concisely expressed, and then repeated and expanded to convey further insights. This short poem teaches us that in the union between a man and a woman God reveals His image or likeness in a very particular way. We gain additional insight into this calling or purpose further on in the Genesis account:

*The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him' (Genesis 2: 18).*

The Hebrew word translated 'helper' is used infrequently in the Old Testament, usually speaking of God Himself (e.g. Psalm 70:5). On the other rare occasions that the word is used of humans the sense conveyed is that of coming to the aid of another bringing additional resources, without which failure would be inevitable (e.g. Isaiah 30:5; Ezekiel 12:14). A man on his own could not fulfil God's purpose. By implication two men in partnership could not fulfil God's purpose, since they would merely double the resources that one man supplies, but would not bring those other complementary resources without which failure would be inevitable. The Genesis account, perhaps a little humorously, speaks of a search to find a suitable complementary partner, but without success. Only

with God's provision of both man and woman would the two of them in union together be capable of expressing the image of God in the way He intended.

This helps us understand more fully what Jesus meant when he said,

*"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. ... Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."* (Matt 19: 5,6)

A man and a woman united together in marriage become one, and God brings this about because His purpose for them is to reflect His image, who is Himself One.

It also helps us understand more fully what Peter meant when he described a husband and wife as *"Heirs together of the grace of life"* (1 Pet 3: 7). The God who said, *"It is I who give life"* (Deut 32: 39) bestows this grace upon a man and a woman united together in marriage. Together they become life-givers, expressing the image of God who is the only Source of Life.

So the Scripture teaches us that what makes marriage special is the blessing that God has bestowed upon it – that of expressing the image of God. This image could not be revealed as God intended without both sexes, male and female, contributing their distinctive attributes. And two specific aspects of God's image revealed in marriage are that He is One, and that He is the Source of Life.

No other earthly relationship has this blessing and privilege bestowed upon it. There is, of course, a heavenly relationship that does, of which marriage between a man and a woman is but a shadow. I speak of course of the relationship between Christ and His bride, the Church. But no other earthly relationship, however committed, however loving, however sacrificial, however fulfilling, will serve the purpose God had in mind. Why can we be so confident about this? Because the Scripture says, *"For the man there was not found another helper suitable for him"* (Gen 2: 20). **None other was suitable.**

So we may call another type of covenant relationship "Holy Matrimony", but that will not somehow make the relationship conform to God's purpose for marriage. We may devise a liturgy that pronounces the partners to be "one," but that will not invoke the power of God to join them together in the way of which Jesus spoke. We may bestow a blessing and bid them to go forth and be fruitful and multiply, but that will not make them heirs together of the grace of life.

We have a solemn duty to proclaim to our generation the glory and sanctity of marriage as God Himself planned and instituted it. But there is another reason why we must hold fast to God's revealed will and purpose concerning Holy Matrimony. If we call holy what God does not then we risk falling into the same error for which Jesus rebuked the Pharisees, when, quoting the prophet Isaiah, He said,

*"But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men"*  
(Matt 15: 9).

So, the challenge before us is to answer this simple question with all honesty and humility. The proposal to change the Canon Law on marriage: does it agree with the doctrines of God, or is it derived from the precepts of men?

Stephen P Townsend  
4 March 2017