

Marriage as a sign of the Kingdom

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The Hunt family had survived a rough crossing of the English Channel. It was, as Richard described it, a three-chuck crossing because he had emptied his stomach three times.

Judy sailed these stormy waters with serenity. She had taken ginger tablets.

I, on the other hand, was a known sturdy sailor. Never ever sick at sea. Well, hardly ever.

Judy watched her two boys getting greener as the horizon tipped continuously from above our heads to below our feet. She was concerned and comforting. "I think Richard's going to be sick," she said. An expression of a mother's concern and compassion for her offspring. This was Judy's role—to show us someone cared about us.

I assumed that my role in this rock 'n' roll experience was to find solutions. I went looking for a vomit bag. Richard duly filled it. I staggered and clawed my way to the toilets to empty it. I found the toilets busier than half-time at the MCG. I came back with a supply of vomit bags, sufficient for an Atlantic crossing.

"Why are you not sick?" I asked Judy. Only partially out of resentment, mind you.

She looked up from the English Women's Weekly on her lap and said brightly, "I took ginger tablets."

"I think I better have one," I confided. I took three.

Soon we were alighting in Calais, France. And within a few minutes we were on the smooth and flat and not-tipping-from-side-to-side European Autobahn. Our stomachs and our moods settled. All appeared well with the world. The world outside, and the world within.

Somewhere between Calais and Brussels Judy made a mistake. And I became a man behaving badly.

Judy asked "Do you know where we are going?"

Now, I hasten to point out that Judy was not intending to question my manly competence. She was not meaning to say that she thought I lacked the competence to find my way across Europe. But I was still feeling a bit vulnerable after the near-shipwreck experience on the three-chuck crossing of the Channel, and I reacted true to form.

I said, "Of course, I know where we're going. We're going to Liege."

Now, what I did not say was that I had never been on this road before, nor had I ever been to Liege, and I only had a general sense that Liege was located somewhere on the other side

of Brussels. Of course, I had a map, but it would be below my dignity to consult it until I had demonstrated my uncanny ability to get close *without* consulting the map.

Judy, gifted as she is in reading moods, shrugged her shoulders and fell into deep consultation with the English Women's Weekly. Meanwhile I kept us tracking generally west, and following the road signs that occasionally pointed towards Liege.

But then we came up to a road sign that did not contain the name "Liege." It said "Brussels City Centre" (in French), and some other town names, none of which was Liege. Since we were travelling at autobahn speed, I made the decision to go into Brussels. And we found ourselves on the Ring Road around Brussels.

I kept looking for any sign that would turn us off towards Liege, but I saw none.

After about an hour it became clear that we were literally going round in circles. Or, at least, going around in one big circle. Around the ring road.

I think Judy and I had both worked this out a little while before either of us commented. But finally Judy said "Haven't we been here before?"

Now you will notice that Judy, who had been living with me, and driving with me, for over 30 years by this time, did not say "I think we are lost." Or perhaps even more accurately, "Philip, you are lost." That would have been a direct attack on my competence. And competence is important to me, or at least the maintenance of an illusion of competence. So Judy just asked, to nobody in particular "Haven't we been here before?"

I agreed that we did now appear to have circumnavigated Brussels at least once. And that any further circumnavigation would be foolish. Clearly, at this point we had two options. One, I could continue to rely on my fabulous sense of direction. Or, perhaps more sensibly, we could pull over and ask someone for advice.

Naturally, I decided the matter for us. "The freeway we were on is in that direction," I said pointing in the general direction of Finland, and I turned the car and headed north. If Judy let out a resigned sigh, she was kind enough to do it quietly.

We drove for about 20 minutes through increasingly dangerous looking suburbs until finally, lo and behold, there it was. The freeway. Only it was up in the air. High above the houses. With no sign of any way to get up onto it.

"Perhaps we should ask someone," Judy suggested rather boldly. Well, of course, having proven that I was competent to *find* the lost highway, I condescended to ask advice about how to find the on ramp. We saw a man putting a television set in the back of his hatch-back and, hoping he wasn't actually stealing the television set, we used the only French sentence we were confident with. Parlez-vous Anglais? (Do you speak English?).

Amazingly he not only spoke English, he understood OUR English. And he explained that the road signs here were in Flemish not French. At the point we got lost, Liege had been replaced with its Flemish equivalent. Now that we were armed with one whole word of

Flemish, namely the Flemish name for the town of Liege, we were safely and securely and happily on our way again.

What, you are asking, is the point of this story?

Well, the point is that Judy and I are different people. Different people in the same car. Different people going in the same direction. Different people lost somewhere between the moon and Brussels City.

One is tempted to suggest that men and women are different. That men think one way: and women think another way. And of course there is some truth in this. But I suspect it is not that simple.

Perhaps you have read the book by John Gray, "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus." If you are presently in a marriage relationship, or if you intend to be in a marriage relationship some day, you could do a lot worse than read John Gray's book. The book is sub-titled "A practical Guide for Improving Communication and getting what you want in your relationships."

John Gray describes a number of ways in which men and women fail at communication with one another.

For example, he talks about the two biggest mistakes that men and women make in relating to the opposite sex. For men, the mistake is to offer solutions and to invalidate the feelings of women. For women, the mistake is to offer unsolicited advice or direction.

Men instinctively offer solutions when women talk about their problems. That's because a man isn't going to talk about a problem at all, unless he really does want advice.

And of course, women talk about their problems all the time. But not because they want solutions. What they want is to share their feelings.

So a couple might come home from a busy day in their respective offices and the woman might say, "Oh there is so much to do. I don't have any time for myself."

And the man will probably immediately hear the problem and say something like "You should resign. You don't have to work so hard."

Well, she wasn't looking for a solution, she was looking for empathy. What the man should have done, of course, was take a big deep breath and say, "Oh, sounds like you had a hard day."

After a while, the man will hopefully get the idea that there isn't much point in trying to change the way a woman feels. Her feelings are her feelings. Leave them alone. Just try, as hard as it might be sometimes, to identify WITH her feelings.

I'm reminded of that marvellous scene in Fawlty Towers where Sybil Fawlty is on the telephone talking to some friend while Basil is trying to get her attention. We can only hear

Sybil's end of the conversation and she is just saying "I know" over and over. "Oh, I know. I know. I know."

It's funny because we recognise that's the way women talk to one another. They share feelings. And they know what it feels like.

Which is why lunch in a café is a different idea for men and women. Women go to lunch in a café for the relationship. Men go for the food. Or perhaps the convenience. Or, perhaps, they go because the structure and order of a restaurant provides a comfortable framework—it's a secure, ordered place in which to do a relationship.

But there's a further problem in the example I gave. When the man says "You should resign" he is actually trying to be loving and helpful, even if the woman doesn't get it. He's just doing what he thinks is right. Even if it's actually wrong.

And what does the woman do? She rejects his advice. She says "But I don't want to resign. What a stupid idea. I love my job, thank you very much."

Now the man is confused. But worse, when his advice is rejected. HE feels rejected. When his advice is questioned, the man's competence is called into question. His confidence is undermined. He feels less loved.

Worse, the woman might offer some unsolicited advice of her own. For a man, this is deadly. Because men want to be accepted, they don't want to be improved.

"You shouldn't drive so fast, you'll get a fine."

"You should call a plumber. He'll know how to fix it."

"I didn't know where you were." Sub-text—you should have called.

John Gray's book is full of interesting insights into what goes wrong between men and women, and what we can do about it.

He makes two very simple suggestions to improve our relationships. I think if we just try these, even for a week, it could vastly improve our relationships and our lives.

The first is to women. He says, "if you are a woman, I suggest that for the next week you practise restraining yourself from giving *any* unsolicited advice or criticism. The men in your life will not only appreciate it, but also they will be more attentive and responsive to you."

And men? "If you are a man, I suggest that for the next week you practise listening *whenever* a woman speaks, with the sole intention of respectfully understanding what she is going through. Practise biting your tongue whenever you get the urge to offer a solution or change how she is feeling. You will be surprised when you experience how much she appreciates you."

My only reservation about the book is that he tends to put us into boxes. Men are like this and women are like that, is much the same way of saying that ALL men are like this, and ALL women are like that. And you only need to think about a few of your friends to see that

some of the women you know are rather like the men John Gray is describing. And some of the men you know are rather like the women John Gray is describing. Some men are very relational and feelings oriented. And some men are very task-focussed and solutions oriented. And some are both.

So while we can recognise some general wisdom here, I'd say we need to be careful about taking it too far.

However, he does make one observation that seems to me to be generally true. That is, that opposites tend to attract. Now again, not always. In most relationships there is a mixture of things held in common, and things that are different. Judy and I grew up in similar families. White, anglo-saxon, Protestant, middle-class, work-at-home mothers, white collar managerial fathers. We are both middle children—Judy the girl between two brothers, and me the boy between two sisters. We both were conscripted into playing the organ in church which led to a wider interest in music. And that interest in music caused us to meet and fall in love. A lot of common attraction in that background.

Yet, we are very different in so many ways. Judy is extroverted and feelings-oriented, where I am introverted and reflective. Judy loves to stop and chat after church, whereas I am impatient to be off and actually DOING something. Of course, I've learned that stopping and chatting is also actually DOING something, especially for Judy.

And there are many more ways in which we are different.

But this is the divine wisdom in the way God made us. Male and female. He made us different for a purpose and, I believe, God created marriage as a framework in which we are to fulfil his purpose. In other words, I believe marriage is divinely ordained. Just as God created men and women, he also created marriage.

Now I don't want to say that all men and all women *have* to be married to live fulfilled lives. There is no doubt that some people are called by God to live singly. The apostle Paul himself felt that the single life was his vocation, his divine calling. And I think we must respect and appreciate those people who are married to their vocation. The tradition in the church of the *religious* who marries themselves to the church, is a fine and noble thing. And I think God does call many into this special relationship with Him instead of calling them into a relationship with the opposite sex.

However, for those who are called into marriage, we in the Christian church believe that it is God Himself who calls us into this relationship. And it is for this reason that, for Christians, marriage is a sacrament of the church. It is something God does, just as much as it is something that the man and the woman does.

But, you know, it was not always so.

Christian marriages have only been routinely celebrated in the church for about 500 years. Before the 16th century it was much more common for people to be married in civil ceremonies. The church played very little part in marriages before 1563, or more often, the church played no part at all. The couple rocked up to the local town hall, and a magistrate or

a Justice of the Peace asked them some questions about their intentions, signed some papers and it was all legal.

Prior to 1563 there were weddings in churches, but the practice was very inconsistent. Some churches did weddings, many did not.

Then in 1563, at the Catholic Church's Council of Trent, the Christian church decided that marriage was indeed the business of the church, that God had a special reason for marriage that made Christian marriage more than a simple contract between a man and a woman. Indeed the Catholic Council of Trent said the ceremony of matrimony was a sacrament.

What's a sacrament? And why does it matter? A sacrament is "an outward sign of inward grace". That is, it's a visible expression of what the Holy Spirit is doing inside. And more than this, the church believes that its sacraments were given to us by Jesus himself together with an instruction to continue to observe the outward signs. In other words, Jesus asked us to do these things, and he promised to send his Holy Spirit to do the work inside us that we are expressing outwardly.

For example, all Christian churches believe that the Eucharist, the Holy Communion, is a sacrament. The taking and sharing of the bread and wine are visible, outward signs that we are the body of Christ and his life-blood flows through us into the world.

In the Catholic Church there are 7 sacraments. The last to be added to the list was the sacrament of matrimony. But while most Protestants don't consider marriage to be a sacrament, we continue to think it is important enough for it to be celebrated in a church.

Over the centuries, there has been an enormous and still unfinished debate about the place of marriage in the Christian church. Most of the debate centring around the issue of making babies, and the raising of children.

Now I am not going to suggest that there is something wrong with this, but I think it is fair to observe that most of this debate appears to me to have overlooked what Jesus himself said about marriage. It does not emphasise what Jesus himself emphasises. You would think that a church that followed Jesus might be a bit interested in exactly what he had to say about marriage. What did Jesus say was the reason for marriage?

We read this morning from an incident in which the Pharisees tried to trick Jesus into a debate about divorce. Jesus's answer is not about divorce. It's about marriage.

He says, "For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one."

For what reason is a man to leave his father and mother and be united to his wife? The answer is – so they are no longer two but one.

Now I think that God always intended that marriage ought to be important in the church. And from the very beginning, there were people who knew this even if they didn't understand why they knew it.

And whatever reason the Council of Trent said they had for actually deciding that marriage was a sacrament, God had his own reasons. And those reasons had to do with what Jesus said about married people no longer being two but one.

I believe that marriage is important to God and important in the Kingdom of God because it is a place where can practice being followers of Christ. You see, to be a Christian means dying to self and allowing the Spirit of God to take charge of our lives.

In marriage, at least in the kind of marriage God has in mind for us, we have the opportunity to die to our own desires, and learn to create ourselves as part of new beings. Or, as our other reading said today, “if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old has gone; the new has come.”

In marriage, a man leaves his father and mother, is united with his wife, and they become a new creation. The two become one. A new creation. Not one plus one equals two. But one plus one equals one. One man plus one woman equals a new creation.

Marriage in God’s plan is not mechanical. It is not like the putting of some bricks together to make a wall. You can see what the brick does, even when the wall is built. I think God has something more revolutionary in mind. He wants us to enter into marriage so that the bricks become invisible.

A better metaphor might be the baking of a cake. You put in the ingredients, stir them together, cook it in a moderate oven and a cake emerges. A new creation. And a new creation in which you can’t see the ingredients any more.

I think this is more like what God has in mind for us. He wants those of us he calls to enter into marriage, to lose our old selves and create a new thing that is more than the sum of the two parts.

The great adventure we are called into when we marry is the adventure of melding two personalities into a new personality. The total union of two personalities. Indeed, the completion of two personalities.

The Greek philosopher Plato had an interesting idea. He told a story about how we humans were once all perfect spheres. Except that the god Zeus split us in half, so that we would spend the rest of our lives searching for what we have lost--our missing double. Only when we found our double, would we be complete.

Like most of these myths, the idea of the double addresses something fundamental in the way God made us human. That for many people, maybe all of us, we are incomplete as individuals. “No man is an island, entire of itself”—said the English poet, John Donne.

As the Scots preacher, William Barclay, says in his commentary on the Gospel we read today, “Marriage should not narrow life, it should complete it ... it is the union of two personalities in which the two complete each other.”

A man. A woman. A new creation.

I believe this is the central point of marriage. Sure there are other important aspects. Procreation. The raising of children. But the central thing is the adventure of creating a new personality.

This is what Jesus talked about. This is what he emphasised.

It's amazing to me that we have been so slow to see it and affirm it. In English we don't even have a good word for this new creation. We have a man. We have a woman. What do we call the new creation? A couple? Husband and Wife? The words still emphasise the components of the union, instead of the union itself.

Yet it is this creation of something new, something that is more than one plus one, that is the central point of Christian marriage, the central reason for God's interest in marriage.

God sees that in successful marriages we discover how to think more of the happiness of others, than of ourself. In successful marriages we see the love that is proud to serve, glad to give, able to understand, and therefore always ready to forgive. In successful marriages we see the marks of the Kingdom of God.

That's why God cares about marriage, because in successful marriages we see a Christlike love. A love that knows that in forgetting self it will find self, and in losing self it will complete itself.

A-men.