

## Marriage Its Sanctity and Spirituality

Over the past centuries, since marriage was instituted in the church and incorporated as one of the seven sacraments, it seems to have had a chequered history and sometimes, latterly been little more than a legal contract. So where, one might ask, is the sanctity in that? The marriage contract, as many understand it, is based on love and union. A very open promise or vow to each other that they will give each other the same love, through sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse, forsaking all others, as long as they both shall live. It is my belief that matrimony is essentially a spiritual act and as such reflects an inner union of two souls with an affinity to one another. When our Lord was questioned by the Pharisees he said: "Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." (Matt. 19:4-6)

Having worked for a well-known national counselling agency as a relationship Counsellor and recalling many of the clients that passed through the counselling process, I have often pondered on the many levels of this complex human interaction. I believe that problems may occur on the material, mental, psychological and spiritual levels. It is clear to me that although I was using a psychological model in therapy, (Psychodynamic), I was often inspired to include my own spiritual understanding, veiled in a cloak of psychology. It was when I was able to use this form of counselling that the most productive results were forthcoming. Over the years my understanding of human relationships and particularly the sacrament of marriage became

more developed due to the wealth of subject material coming through the doors of the counselling room.

You may ask, why does one human being become attracted to another and moreover, want to spend the rest of their lives with them. Given that the human nature is prone to be naturally self-centred, how could this mutuality possibly be successful? Again we might look to the multi-level nature of humanity for an answer. On a material level there is often a physical or sexual attraction, a connection that draws many into a deeper relationship. On the mental level couples may often have much in common and are said to be 'like-minded' or have an affinity to one another. On a psychological level I believe that much depends on the individual's life experiences and how they assimilate with each other's psychological needs. Much of the therapy in the counselling room is directed at a greater understanding of childhood experiences and how they affect adult behaviour. When two people come together forming a relationship and their psychology is compatible, this is often termed the 'relationship fit'. On the spiritual level I believe we have the most profound and complex issues to consider. Before we can even begin to give consideration to this level it is necessary to look at what is involved and what we mean by spiritual.

In many respects, the spiritual relates to our eternal nature rather than our physical or temporary nature. With this in mind we might consider why two people are spiritually drawn together at all seeing as it is our soul's spiritual quest to find union with the Godhead, believe that the estate of marriage is a reflection of that inner, spiritual marriage. Tradition in the Catholic Church says that when husband and wife are joined in matrimony, the physical union is blessed and that there is a profound conviction that there is an interior Divine grace conferred upon the union.

The Anglican Book of Common Prayer speaks of the sacraments as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible Grace.” Furthermore, the Catholic Encyclopaedia has the following to say on the sacrament of matrimony:

“That Christian marriage (i.e. marriage between baptized persons) is really a sacrament of the New Law in the strict sense of the word is for all Catholics an indubitable truth. According to the Council of Trent this dogma has always been taught by the Church, and is thus defined in canon i, Sess. XXIV: “If any one shall say that matrimony is not truly and properly one of the Seven Sacraments of the Evangelical Law, instituted by Christ our Lord, but was invented in the Church by men, and does not confer grace, let him be anathema. But the decision of Trent was not the first given by the Church. The Council of Florence, in the Decree for the Armenians, had already declared: “The seventh sacrament is matrimony, which is a figure of the union of Christ, and the Church, according to the words of the Apostle: This is a great sacrament, but I speak in Christ and in the Church.”

It seems to me that in our modern society with all its propensity to be ‘politically correct’, we may be losing some of the essential mutuality of a marriage. There is often a tendency for one partner wanting to be ‘more powerful’ than the other causing a power struggle or manipulative behaviour. The advice given to us in the scriptures is often thought of as ‘old fashioned’ or inappropriate for our current needs. I am calling to mind Ephesians 5: 21-33 and thinking that most couples would find St. Paul’s words unpalatable. Actually, I see nothing of the sort. My understanding of this letter to the Ephesians is a guideline for equality and mutuality rather than subordination. Clearly the condition of women’s lives currently bears little relation to that of first century women. Social, economic and educational matters have changed, contraception has freed them

from unceasing child bearing and rearing. However, there will always be a fundamental difference between masculinity and femininity. This difference doesn't need to imply an inequality once a measure of mutuality is in place. After all, it was St. Paul who affirmed that there is neither male nor female in Christ, (Galatians 3:28). It may involve self-sacrifice, but isn't that the whole point? If both husband and wife join together in a mutual relationship, caring for each other and both putting each other's needs before their own concerns, isn't that a formula for success? I believe it is often a case of 'letting go of the self' and focussing upon a more mutual approach.

In the counselling room I would often ask whether couples would consider putting into place a few rules. These rules would be voluntary but turn out to have a profound affect upon the relationship. The first rule was to not say or do anything to their partner that they wouldn't want their partner to say or do to them. It would require a certain amount of thought before speaking or acting but with a little practice, it would be the first step to reconciliation.

The second rule was for both individuals to try and always consider what might bring their partner happiness. It might be a simple consideration like helping with the washing up or phoning home if one or the other is likely to be delayed.

The third rule was to listen to their partner and not to talk over them. This sometimes took the form of a 'listening exercise' where both partners would take it in turns to talk for a predetermined length of time, without the 'listener' commenting or replying until it was their turn to talk. Clearly, it was carefully explained that communication is often by body language and facial expression, as well as the speaking voice so care was also needed in these areas. Over the course of several weeks the subject of discussion would sometimes be about positive and sometimes negative issues.

In short, the rules involved three things, mutual support, mutual consideration and mutual respect. These three attributes often lead to a forth, very important attribute, that is, mutual understanding. later found that many of the couples used this formula with a good degree of success in other relationships such as employer-employee, family, friends, etc. It is my belief that our relationship with others, reflect our relationship with Christ. If we are in communion with our Lord, we are often in good communion with others whom we come into contact with. If others are not so inclined then I believe that we should still practice the above as our actions will often have a reaction on others and like attracts like. Maybe this was what was meant by Jesus advising us to 'turn the other cheek' (Matthew 5: 39). We might also consider the meaning of Matthew 5: 44 where we are advised to love our enemies and bless them that curse you.

It seems that any interaction or communication requires some form of mutuality in order to be successful. If we act in a way that only focuses on the self, then we shall only fuel the ego and bring about our own unhappiness. By a degree of self-sacrifice we might show others that they matter and that their happiness is important too. And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. (Matthew 25:39-41)

So what then of love? It is my belief that God alone is Love, beyond human comprehension and understanding. We are informed by the scriptures that we are created in God's image and so clearly capable of loving one another. Love is the spiritual attraction which has the power to draw a man and woman together, spiritually uniting their souls. However, we also have human nature which often tends to cloud the purity of our love. Our worldly concerns sometimes draw us away from

our spiritual love and combine it with a confusion of other physical, emotional and psychological characteristics. A great deal seems to depend on the original nature of the marital union. Was the initial attraction physical, sexual, emotional, social or spiritual? If they have come together for worldly or selfish motives then the couple may well struggle to maintain the relationship. It might be that commonality develops between the couple that binds the relationship, but this is likely to only last one lifetime.

I think it is sometimes the case that couples are drawn by a more spiritual urge and this engenders affection for one another that is beyond words. Often this marriage is marked by the couple who love each other for who they really are rather than what they are, what they have or what they might look like. It is almost as if they are experiencing the beauty of each other's soul rather than the physical body. It is this bond that reflects on one level the divine union of the heavenly marriage. There becomes established a bond of love, a harmony that seems to be born out of time and space and is likely to stretch beyond any individual lifetime.

It seems to me that in order to maintain a loving relationship we need to be mindful of each other's needs (on all levels), maintain a healthy communication and where necessary, be willing to make compromises. St. Ignatius of Loyola says: "Love ought to be put more in deeds than in words". It is often too easy to see fault in others rather than in ourselves. We might need to look within ourselves in order to have a better understanding of any changes that might be necessary to better compliment our partners. It might be that with the help of a marital relationship we discover things within ourselves that we were previously unaware of. In his book A.E. Waite says "The general definition of love is that it is a vivifying spirit which permeates the whole world, and a bond uniting the entire

universe. But the proper definition of the perfect love of man and woman is the concurrence of the loving with the beloved to this end, that the beloved shall be transformed into the lover.”

And so, to return to the sanctity of marriage, I believe that we are blessed in many ways by the gift of a lifelong partner. One to encourage, support and comfort us when we need close companionship. We look to our Lord for our spiritual needs but it is a comforting thought that we often have a special relationship with another soul who is part of our lives and becomes like-minded and mutually focussed. Together we can tread life’s path, even if it might only be for one incarnation.