

1 Kings 2. 10-12, 3. 3-14

Ephesians 5. 15-20

Mark 9. 30-37

So we come to the third week of thinking about the Uniting Church's willingness to address questions of sexuality and faith, leadership and ordination and the question of marriage, which we explore today. We'll look at the Christian understanding of marriage, changes in the way we have come to understand marriage, especially in the last century or two, and what it is that is actually happening in a marriage service.

I want to talk about marriage and the marriage rite, more than marriage equality, although this is what I will be asking the church council to consider: what we can now at this time say about marriage; and what we can't. And what we can't say about it any longer.

In 2017 the Parliament of Australia passed amendments to the Marriage Act to enable marriage in Australia to be understood as the union of 2 people to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life. This meant that two people, whatever their sexual and gender differences, could enter a union to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life, a union which is recognised in and protected by law.

My first ministry placement was in the Presbytery of Bourke, which was later absorbed into Yarra Yarra Presbytery. It was 2004 when I began and the fallout of the UCA decision that a person's sexuality was not a barrier to ordination was still live and regularly there were heated debates at presbytery. One colleague, a Rev. Dr, would often stand to make a point about marriage, wag his finger, and invoke the "biblical model of marriage" as the basis of his argument about the nature of human sexuality and marriage. I think he expected us to all fall down when he used this expression. But I always felt I was being got at by this rather curly phrase. By the biblical model of marriage, I was not sure what he meant:

- Was it Abraham, the father of faith, taking his wife's slave girl Hagar as surrogate, in order that she might bear a child for the barren couple.
- was it Jacob who took two wives, Leah and Rebecca; sisters and his first cousins. Along with him having children with their slave-girls also.
- Was the learned gentleman calling to mind King David who had Uriah knocked off so that he could have his way with Bathsheba.
- And wondering about David, I always become a bit hot and sweaty when reading about David's affection for Jonathan, the son of King Saul. This affection always seemed to be a bit more than just platonic.
- Or maybe he was thinking of the wise Solomon and his dozens of wives.
- Or was it the prophet Hosea he was thinking of, told by the Lord to take a wife of whoredom – as the text calls it.

- Or was it the understanding of marriage implicit in the Decalogue, the ten commandments, where to covet a woman is not so much the problem, but the coveting of another man's wife. The woman being the man's property.
- And Jesus; he talks about being made eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. A hard teaching he says; let anyone accept it who can. But he indicates that abstaining from marriage is a high calling.
- And Paul suggests that those who refrain from marriage will do better in their devotion to the Lord. As someone tried to convince me, and then Chris, that he discerned that abstinence from marriage was my calling.

I was confused by my learned colleague's insistence that there is a biblical model of marriage. Truth be told, there is not one. And it's deceptive to suggest that there is. We are on our own. We have to work it out; and we cannot resort to some scriptural mandate to back up our argument. And it's deceptive to suggest that Christians have the right take on what marriage is about. Because the truth is that all societies have practised marriage in a variety of forms over millennia. And as we have culturally become a more diverse society in Australia we find other expressions and approaches to marriage in our midst. It is common for marriages in the Indian diaspora to be arranged – an Indian Orthodox ministry colleague I know is in an arranged marriage.

What we affirm in the church is a Christian understanding of marriage and our understanding of the character of what this means is much more than a collection of proof texts. Indeed, the Uniting Church's struggle has been a process of applying the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to deliberating about marriage – firstly, being rooted in scripture, then mining and negotiating the tradition – asking probing questions about our heritage - , using our reason and listening to our own and other's experience.

We have to be honest that the understanding of marriage has changed over time and, especially in the last 4 or 5 decades, has changed very dramatically.

- No-fault divorce
- Mrs Andrew Boyle
- Until the year I was born it was legal for a girl of 14 to be married in both Tasmania and WA.
- Man voted for the household 1902
- Wife as property handed from father to husband – who gives this woman

We still had remnants of this understanding of marriage until quite recently. In the marriage service the daughter was considered to be passed from the control and protection of the father to the husband. Who gives this woman? was the question that many of your fathers were asked. I find it utterly anachronistic that a contemporary daughter of feminism – possibly living together with her partner - would still want her father to walk her down the aisle as some remnant of this archaic transaction.

What is probably invisible to you and to some extent it was to me until the national debate over same-sex marriage, is that when I conduct a marriage service, I wear two hats. I am duly authorised by law under the Australia Marriage Act 1961 and amended in 2017, to solemnise marriages between two people. I have a license to legally verify that a marriage has taken place.

And I also bless on behalf of the church. I conduct a marriage service on behalf of the state which also has some Christian elements to it. Usually fewer than I would like. I would like to be able to celebrate the Eucharist in the context of a marriage service but we are so frightened of being too religious in this country that the service is paired down to bare-bones.

The most helpful expression of Christian marriage I have heard are a few words from an Anglican priest one morning when he welcomed a couple who were due to be married in the church the next Saturday. He said: *welcome to Peter and Julie, who will give themselves to each other in marriage, here next Saturday.* He didn't say: I will marry them. He didn't say: they will get married. He didn't say: they will get hitched. He said: they will give themselves to each other in marriage. The Christian understanding of marriage is that it is a covenant – a deeply Judeo-Christian understanding of mutual commitment, come what may.

In solemnising a marriage what I do, or any other marriage celebrant does – whether they are religious or not - is that we verify on behalf of the Commonwealth of Australia that a couple have exchanged vows in the presence of myself and the gathered witnesses - that they have vowed to each other that they are voluntarily entering into a union, to the exclusion of all others, with each other, for life.

But a Christian marriage service seeks to do much more than ensure that a few words exchanged to satisfy the law. We in the church have some things to say about love – not just ours, but especially the love of God; and we have some things to say about commitment, devotion, grace. We seek to place the couple into a much bigger picture than themselves. We place them in the whole story of God and humanity, we place them in the story of the people of the God of love and we uphold them with a love that says that this is not a happily ever after fairy story that we're involved in here but an entering into a union which may be tough and painful and require all of our reliance upon the mercy of God.

The distinctive thing that I do, that we do, and I invite those present to share with me in this, is that we pray a blessing for the marrying couple. We lay hands on them. We bless them and pray God's blessing for them. And we, the gathered congregation, seek to be a blessing to the couple not just on the day but for all their years together. In being invited to witness their vows being exchanged, we also become party to the marriage – because we need each other, we need the support of the whole village to uphold us and enfold us. The prince and princess fairy tale of the atomised couple, living happily ever after and raising a free-floating, suburban nuclear family is something we have tried for just a few decades now – but it has been found wanting and is crumbling.

In most countries in Europe when a couple want to marry they must first be legally married in the town hall, or some other kind of civic office. If they then want the blessing of the church, a separate church service is then held. Maybe the same; often the next day. This is done in Italy, France, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, Japan amongst others. A priest cannot legally solemnize a marriage. This is the state's business. And so the church service has a much greater weight and distinctiveness. It's clear that no legal business is being transacted in the church service but we are invoking heaven as we do something which is profoundly human. And in this separation of church and state it's possible to properly see what it is the church does.

When I marry someone the boundary between church and state is very blurred.

So, if we are clear that what Christians do in a Christian marriage service is to bless people in the name of God, we need to ask ourselves some questions: as disciples to Jesus' disciples, who are we called to bless? As disciples of Jesus, this beloved son of the father who blessed so lavishly, who are we called to be blessing to in the name of the gospel? And, given this congregation's affirmation of gracious hospitality, and the methodist understanding of grace – immense, unfathomed, unconfined - I believe we need to ask ourselves the question: why not?

If we are not willing to bless someone and honour their human journey – especially when they seek it from the church - then I believe we participate in a culture of shame. The culture which prevented aboriginal people from marrying was about shame. It was part of culture which said that you are less than human and we want to erase you from our midst. Your identity is shameful.

As we have explored in the last weeks, it has been a culture of shame the church has been guilty of projecting onto the rainbow people. The church has perpetuated a culture which has sent the message: you are less than human; your identity is shameful; we will not allow you in our midst. Or if we are so magnanimous, as to have you in our midst, we will only tolerate you. Don't ask; don't tell. This is not grace. This is not gracious hospitality.

In the marriage service Uniting Church ministers use a Statement of Purpose which is a reminder for all gathered about what we understand marriage to be. This Statement was degendered following the Assembly's decision about marriage in 2017. I will read through it now. I wonder if you could say Amen to it as you were gathered with a couple of the same sex and all those who love them.

► DECLARATION OF PURPOSE

Marriage is a gift of God  
and a means of grace.  
In the life-long union of marriage  
we can know the joy of God,  
in whose image we are made.

Marriage is founded in God's loving nature,  
and in the covenant of love made with us in Christ.  
Two people, in giving themselves to each other in love,  
reflect the love of Christ for his Church.

In Christian marriage,  
couples are called  
to live together faithfully,  
and to love each other with respect,  
tenderness and delight.

The companionship and comfort of marriage  
enables the full expression  
of physical love.  
They share the life of a home  
and may be entrusted  
with the gift and care of children.  
They help to shape a society  
in which human dignity and happiness  
may flourish and abound.

Marriage is a way of life that all people should honour;  
it is not to be entered into lightly or selfishly,  
but responsibly and in the love of God.

N and N are now to begin this way of life  
that God has created and Christ has blessed.  
Therefore, on this their wedding day,  
we pray that they may fulfil God's purpose  
for the whole of their lives.