

THE SACRAMENTS – 3

Matrimony

Christianity has a reputation for regarding sexuality as something dirty. This is ironic – and tragic. For the truth of the matter is that there is a thread running through the Bible which sees committed sexual love as *the* symbol of the sort of unity that God seeks with us.

In the Old Testament, God is described as Israel’s faithful ‘spouse’, Israel’s ‘bridegroom’ (see Is 54:5). The most dramatic presentation of this idea is to be found in Ezekiel chapter 16 where Israel’s history is presented as the story of a defenceless new born baby who a passing-by lover decides to woo. “I saw you kicking on the ground in your blood as I was passing, and I said to you.....: Live! And I made you grow like the grass of the fields. You ... reached marriageable age. Your breasts became firm and your hair grew richly, but you were stark naked...Your time had come, the time for love. I covered your nakedness. I gave you my oath. I made a covenant with you and you became mine.”

1

The girl is Israel, the lover is God, the covenant is their marriage. She is showered with every conceivable gift. Her response, however is to take other lovers, other gods, in short to be unfaithful. Her behaviour goes from bad to worse and she ends up prostituting herself to these other gods. This evokes God’s anger and deep anguish. And yet God’s final word is that he will forgive her for everything she has done.

The image of God as the spouse of God’s people appears also in the new Testament. But there it becomes a symbol of the love and commitment that Christ has for his Church. Christ is the bridegroom, the real bridegroom, who becomes one flesh with humanity through his incarnation. And heaven is pictured as an unending wedding feast.

St Paul summarises all of these ideas in his letter to the Ephesians chapter 5. In this text we are told that the command in Genesis to become one flesh has depths of meaning that go

beyond sexuality for they refer to the 'one flesh', the 'one body' that Christ forms with the Church.

God then wants to be one with us, indeed in us. And we are called to be in God, in a unity of unimaginable depth and joy. Jesus experienced this sort of love and the joy that went with it. As he put it: 'the Father is in me and I am in him'. And it was something that he came to share with all of us. For on the night before he died he prayed: 'Father may they be one in us, as I am in you and you are in me'.

The unity that committed sexual love brings is, therefore, meant to be a symbol of the deeper unity, the deeper and more lasting love-life, that we are all called to. So much so that marriage between two Christians is regarded by the church as a sacrament, one of the seven holy rites that symbolise and make real for such Christians their sharing in the love that binds us all to each other.

2

The sacrament of matrimony then symbolises and makes real for those who receive it that their love for each other is rooted in and sanctified by a deeper love, one with a capital L. Far from being morally suspect, committed sexual love expressed between two Christians in the bonds of marriage is a symbol of the holiest of created holy realities: the fact that we are the body of Christ. Every Christian couple should see in their love-making that sacred depth and the promise of eternal intercourse with Father, Son and neighbour.

Now if all that is so, then husbands and wives must look to God's love as the model for their own love. What are the qualities of that love? Well, they are listed in that famous passage in St Paul's letter to the Corinthians: love is always patient, never jealous, does not seek its own advantage, does not store up grievances, never comes to an end – to name but a few of the qualities listed there. But I would like to concentrate briefly on three qualities here.

The *first quality* of God's love is that it is unconditional. To reflect that love, marital love must also be unconditional. It must not be made with any 'ifs' and 'buts'. God does not love us 'if ...' God simply loves us, full stop. And never stops doing so.

The *second quality* of God's love is that it is endlessly forgiving. If Jesus advised everybody to forgive again and again and again, how much more so is this true of the way a married couple must treat each other. Marriages are built on the foundation of love but the walls that are built thereon are made up of countless bricks of forgiveness.

Thirdly, God's love seeks to share all that it has. Father, Son and Spirit have shared their life totally with us. Marital love is called to mirror this in the generosity of the spouses to each other, and also especially in their willingness to create new life out of their love, if it be possible for them to do so.

3 *Finally*, if the love of a husband and wife is a symbol of God's love for the world, it is also a symbol of God's love for them. This means that when the husband hears his wife saying 'I love you' or 'I forgive you', she is (I believe) entitled to hear God saying the same thing to her behind those words. Her husband's love for her will from now on all become a sign of God's own unbreakable love for her. And similarly he can see in her love for him, the sign of *God's* love for him. And this I believe remains the case throughout their married life. Their love for each other remains a symbol, the embodiment, of God's love for them. And I also believe that their forgiveness of each other embodies God's forgiveness here and now of their weaknesses and failings.

Being symbols and mediators of God's grace to each other begins with the solemn marriage vows that they make to each other. They are the ministers of the sacrament to each other. The priest does not administer the sacrament to them. He is but a witness that the Church demands should be there to confirm that they really married each other. They administer the sacrament to each other. That is to say they become guaranteed channels of God's grace to each other as they make those vows. And I'm of the opinion that their ongoing love and

forgiveness throughout their marriage is a continuation of their administration of the sacrament to each other.

While all the sacraments symbolise one or other aspect of love the one sacrament that symbolises and focuses on love itself is the sacrament of matrimony. It is a love that should be visible to all.

With that we come to the end of the series of talks on the sacraments. I am afraid that time constraints demand that I leave out the last of the sacraments: The Sacrament of Holy Orders. This is the sacrament that Deacons, Priests and Bishops receive when they are ordained to those ministries. Orders is a sacrament that symbolises and makes real for an individual that they have taken on the responsibility of being the visible continuation of Christ's ministry down the ages that he now exercises through the Church.

4 In the past, there used to be quite a few ministries which one could be ordained and which were viewed by many theologians as being part of the sacrament of orders. These days are only three: the diaconate, the priesthood and the episcopate. There is no order higher than that of being a bishop. Bishops are vicars of Christ in their diocese.

Monsignors, cardinals and the papacy are not orders. The first two – monsignori and cardinals - are honours bestowed on certain individuals and often carry with them special responsibilities. The papacy, as we saw some time ago, is a special responsibility for the unity and good of the whole Church which is an extension of the normal responsibilities of one bishop, the Bishop of Rome.