

Pastoral Letter April 2012

True marriage

Different things come under threat in our nation at different times. Supremely, at the present time, it is marriage which is threatened. As we are aware, the coalition government has published proposals to 'redefine' marriage and to legislate in favour of what it terms 'same-sex marriages', so that two men or two women could 'marry' one another. Not so very long ago it would have been inconceivable (for all the moral downgrade in society) that such a proposal would be made. It is a most solemn indication to us of how things have changed in our society, and that for the worse.

Marriage is defined at present in English law in these terms: 'the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman, to the exclusion of all others'. This is absolutely right – and the truth it expresses derives, of course, not from man but from God. Marriage goes right back to creation itself – that is why we refer to it as a creation ordinance. God instituted it for all of mankind for all time – not just for Christians. It is his purpose and his pleasure for all, whether they acknowledge him or not. It is of divine design, and so for that reason alone it is not the place of any governments, societies or individuals to alter it. Man cannot 'redefine' what God himself has 'defined'. Marriage is not open to 'redefinition'. 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh' (Genesis 2:24). That could not be clearer: 'a man' and 'his wife'.

The first marriage which ever took place was between Adam and Eve. It was God who made them for one another, brought them together, and married them. That is the abiding pattern. Nothing has changed, because God and his design have not changed. A man and a woman enter into a solemn, binding and blessed covenant with one another, in the presence of God and of other witnesses. This is so whether the marriage takes place in a church building or elsewhere. Its purpose is first and foremost the glory of God, and it provides the only divinely provided and sanctioned setting both for sexual intimacy and the procreation and upbringing of children.

There is something else about marriage which should never be forgotten and which sets it off with a peculiar lustre. It speaks of and reflects something of the very special union, through grace, of the Lord Jesus Christ (the Bridegroom) and the church (his bride). This is evident in many Scriptures, both of Old and New Testaments (it is what the Song of Songs is all about); but perhaps it is worked out with particular emphasis in the latter part of Ephesians 5. Here, the apostle Paul, having set out the varied and mutual duties of husband and wife, focused in the two commands of wifely submission and husbandly love, builds up to this amazing and glorious statement: 'This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church' (Ephesians 5:32).

To return to our present predicament in the nation, what should we do? We should pray, pray and pray again that God will have mercy upon us and preserve marriage only and precisely as he has intended from the start. We should make whatever representations we can in the cause of upholding true marriage, whether by writing letters, signing petitions, speaking with MPs, and so on. In addition to all of this, however, may the Spirit of God so inhabit our own marriages, those of us who are married, that the glory and wisdom of God, the beauty and loveliness of Christ, and the truth and force of Scripture will be so evident and so commended that the true nature of true marriage cannot be gainsaid.