

**Marriages Made in Heaven**  
**32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday, Year C**  
**Luke 20: 27-38**  
**7 November 2010**

At the back of many Roman Catholic Cathedrals and Churches now there is a display stand promoting the theme of vocations. Attractive photos and brief well written biographies tell the story of those who are offering their lives to God and the Church in different ways. But intriguingly there are three options listed – priesthood, the religious life, and marriage. And as the vulnerable and touching narratives of the couples concerned indicate, they are apparently making a commitment and offering of themselves that equals in God's eyes the high dignity and worth of the enterprise attempted by the seminarians and the novices.

In this way of looking at things marriage isn't something you just drift into because everyone else is hitching up, or because you can't keep your hands off each other, or because the biological clock is ticking and its time to breed. In fact as the couples often say, many of their contemporaries are shackled up with each other, or just go in for temporary hook ups, so the walk down the aisle to the altar is by comparison a bold and adventurous endeavour.

One of the reasons that people may hang back from the enterprise of marriage is that it is for such a long time. In earlier periods of history when most people were dead by what we call mid life a marriage only had to last around 20 years at the most. Now with our greatly expanded life expectations you can anticipate being with your marriage partner through many changes and seasons of life extending over half a century or more. It may be terribly romantic in the early days to say, "You are somebody I want to grow old and die with you," but will we have the courage and the stamina to be with that person when they are old and ill and demented, and have nothing much more to say?

Still, you could take a kind of relieved comfort that one day it will be all over when the biological death of one partner or the other brings that way of life to an end. Those words of Jesus this morning about there being no marriage in heaven appear to be giving support to that perspective. On the face of it we seem to be hearing that our entire way of relating to one another in the life of the world to come will radically change, and that the husband and wife dimension to intimately relating will be out of the picture.

But is that so? Consider the intriguing words of John Nolland from his excellent Luke commentary, "It is perhaps best to think of the relational function of marriage, removed in the life of the age to come from connection with procreation and eroticism, as no longer needing

the exclusivity that is now proper to marriage.” In other words it won't be all over for married couples after they die. Sex and children will be off the agenda, but a different and presumably heightened kind of intimacy will develop that one assumes builds on what was there before.

This of course lengthens the trajectory of marriage time together very considerably, to put it at its most understated. And if the married are to be together forever that raises the issues of what marriage is all about, and what its theological meaning is, in an acute and interesting form. And this has a bearing on what goes on in marriage now.

I remember once as a curate hearing a priest loudly declaim at a regional deanery meeting, “We have something distinctive to offer – Christian marriage!” I waited with baited breath for an explanation of what that amounted to, but it never came. Now thirty years on I have come to some tentative conclusions of my own on the subject, and I offer them here.

The introduction to the Marriage Service in Anglican prayer books gives three reasons or components of marriage – companionship, sex and children. The ranking of those three components has changed in different periods of history, and we have just heard that in the life of the world to come sex and children come out of the equation. Which gets us reflecting on the nature of marital companionship, and what it might develop into.

There are three powerful realities going on in a Christian marriage. The first is that it is the source of the domestic church. Those couples who can have children, or who adopt, are to raise them in such a way that it is as likely as possible that they will develop in to deeply convinced Christian believers. The Jewish community has always been hot on the family as the source of the faith community, and Christians share that perspective. In heaven the biological generation of children will no longer be necessary or possible, but there will be a dimension of spiritual fruitfulness and of fresh Christian generativity that a couple can provide for one another, and for those around them. So what they do for each other will reinforce and influence the life of the blessed in paradise, and so will add to the joy and the bliss of the redeemed.

The second building block of a Christian marriage is close to what I have just been talking about – the couple become a means of and an encouragement to one another's sanctification. In 101 ways of the affairs of daily living they can help to bring something of the love of Christ crucified in to the world. Through a wide variety of practical acts of service and kindness, through thoughtful and attentive ways of relating to one another, and through helpful spiritual practices a Christian couple can model the love that, “bears all things, believes all

things, hopes all things, endures all things.” A couple I know finish each day by asking one another – “is there anything I have said or done today that has caused you hurt or misunderstanding?” This is a good example of Christian marriage as a school for loving. This too will greatly enrich the life of heaven.

Then lastly, Christian marriage is a copy, an image, a paradigm of the relationship between Christ and his Church. It is the relationship within earthly realities that most closely mirrors the deep love that Christ has for his Church, and that the Church is supposed to have for Christ. If we want to think about and imagine just how interested and involved and in love with the Church Jesus Christ is, then think about the kind of feelings a groom has for his bride. So in this sense marriage is a privileged relationship out of all the other possible relationships within human reality, because it gives us an acute insight in to the closeness of the union and the bond that Christ intends to form with his followers. In a recent sermon I said that we will become the collective Jesus Christ in the life of heaven, we will become Him, that He is our destiny. This is an intimacy beyond present human realities, and marriage is the closest we can get within our experience to understanding it. And the good practice of a good Christian marriage will advance that process of forming the collective Christ in the life of heaven.

Given these three powerful potentials within a Christian marriage I can understand why those display stands in Catholic churches are promoting marriage as a vocation. It is apparently a transformational relationship in fitting us for the life of heaven.