

A sermon given on 23 February 2014 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: 1 Corinthians 7:1-16,25-40
(Part of series on 1 Corinthians)

Introduction: Last week Sarah Percival told the story of the King's New Clothes – if you weren't there, it's the story of a king who is so liable to being flattered that he is conned into wearing “magic clothes” that he thinks can be seen by others but in reality don't exist – until a child shouts out that he is naked. Sarah challenged the church – including us – to open our eyes and admit that we haven't got everything sorted when it comes to the subject of sex. Instead of pretending there isn't a problem, she suggested, we should be honest about the struggles we face, as well as recognise that God is calling his church to be a beacon of hope in the world. It's also time to wake up to the fact that young people today are growing up in a world in which people's views about sexual relationships, and their experience of family life, are very far away from what people of my generation and older considered the norm – even if it was a norm that many people departed from.

The theme of last week – taken from chapters 5 and 6 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians – was sexual purity. This week's is Marriage and Singleness, from chapter 7. Sex, love and marriage are subjects that all of us think about a lot – after all, we are talking about a basic instinct which is as strong as the instinct to survive. It is also an area which touches us at the heart of how we see ourselves – who am I as a man or a woman, and how do other people see me? what sorts of relationships do I think I need in order to be emotionally healthy? - and how will other people judge me in the light of my outward appearance, whether I am single or married, whether or not I have children, and so on?

In his short story “The Capital of the World”, Ernest Hemingway tells of a Spanish father and his teenage son. The son, Paco, rebels and runs away from home, and his father begins a long and arduous search for him. As a last resort the exhausted father placed an ad in a Madrid newspaper, hoping that his son would see the ad and respond to it. The ad read: “Dear Paco, Please meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. Love, Father.” The next day at noon, in front of the newspaper office, there were 800 Pacos, all seeking forgiveness from their fathers¹.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians was written 2000 years ago for a church in Greece. But just as 800 Pacos read the ad written for one son and recognised themselves in it, so I think the teaching of last week and this speaks to our situation too. And often, as we hear a bible passage or a sermon about God's ideals for how we should live our lives, we instinctively recognise ourselves in it – and like the Pacos hear an invitation to respond. But sometimes the experience may be uncomfortable. For example, whenever the sermon theme is money, you can be sure that there will be comments from people who feel very awkward about the subject. When it comes to Fairtrade (which is next week), we may start to feel very defensive about the choices we make in the supermarket. And I would be willing to bet that Sarah's sermon last week on sexual purity stirred up some strong feelings too.

So what should we do as a church? Make sure that we only preach nice bland sermons that can't possibly upset anyone? Remember that God loves us but ignore Jesus' words of challenge? Talk about loving each other but without any real-life application that might show us where we are failing? Or shall we be a bit bolder and really seek to engage with God on matters that affect our everyday lives? If we do so, we need to start by remembering that God is our heavenly Father who loves us as a parent loves his or her children. He is not a big policeman in the sky, looking for an opportunity to tell us off and make us feel bad. He is all-

¹ Related in *Still More Hot Illustrations fro Youth Talks*, by Wayne Rice, Zondervan 1999

knowing, all-loving and all-wise. So when he points out things in our lives that need to change, it will always be in our best interests and for our good, and he will help us to put things right.

The context at Corinth

As you will have realised by now, if you've been following our sermon series on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul had heard that there were lots of problems at Corinth. As an apostle and the founder of that church, he couldn't just wash his hands of it, or allow things to spiral out of control. Some of his writing is pretty forthright and challenging, as you will have heard last week. But he also has a pastoral heart for the people, as we will see if we take the trouble to listen to how Paul addresses issues of marriage and singleness in this chapter. In doing so, we need to get behind the actual words and try to understand the theological and pastoral principles that underlie Paul's answers to the questions that had been raised by the leaders of the church in Corinth in their letter.

As we read Paul's answers to these questions, it's a bit like listening in to someone else's telephone conversation – we only hear one person's responses, and have to guess what the questions were at the other end of the line.

We've already seen that there was some sexual misbehaviour in the church in Corinth. Essentially they were doing what everyone else outside the church thought was normal in the permissive society of Greece. [In addition, Corinth contained a temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, where cult prostitution was rife. Some of the Christians at Corinth believed that God was only interested in the soul, and what they did with their bodies didn't matter (see 6:12-20).]

But it seems there were also some of the church who considered themselves to be particularly “spiritual”, who took the view that sex was defiling, even within marriage.

Marriage

It seems from the way Paul answers their questions in chapter 7 that this group were discouraging people from getting married, and also saying that married people should refrain from sex. This seems to be conveyed in the first verse, which commentators understand to be a quotation from the Corinthians' own letter: literally “It is well for a man not to touch a woman” (7:1). (*NIV says “not to get married”*)

Paul comes across as not at all prudish. He is all for sex within the context of marriage, even though he himself was unmarried. His answer in verse 2 is (and I paraphrase) “if you want to have sex, get married!” And he goes on to emphasise that the husband has a duty to give his wife her conjugal rights, and the wife has the same duty towards her husband. “Do not deprive one another”, he goes on in verse 5 – unless you both agree to abstinence for a limited time for the sake of prayer – “but then come back together again”. I remember the smiles on the faces of couples I prepared for marriage in Uganda when I read them this passage. Given that culturally this subject was even less easy to talk about than it is in the UK, I felt it was important to show the couples that this was an area they should be prepared to discuss. Notice also the real equality between husband and wife that Paul emphasises in verse 4, where he says that each partner has authority over the other's body. This is marriage to the max!

Divorce

Next, Paul comes to the question of divorce, a subject which has affected several members of our church. The Church over the centuries has struggled with this question. It is only recently in the Church of England that divorce has become officially accepted, and guidelines issued to help clergy decide whether it is right in a particular case to conduct a second marriage. As you know, I personally believe that there are situations where this is entirely the proper thing

to do, and in the past 9 years I have conducted over 20 such weddings. In deciding that I would be willing to do this, I was influenced by Paul's attitude in this chapter of 1 Corinthians.

In Paul's day, divorce was permitted in Jewish society – although it was only the husband who could divorce his wife – and was very normal in the Graeco-Roman world, where wives could also divorce their husbands. The Roman writer Seneca wrote, “Is there any woman that blushes at divorce now that certain illustrious and noble ladies reckon their years, not by the number of consuls, but by the number of their husbands?”²

What Paul wishes the Corinthians to understand in verses 10-11 is that in the Christian view, marriage is not disposable, but for life – and this comes straight from the teaching of Jesus, who looked back to God's intentions in creation and invented the phrase “What God has joined together, let no one divide” (Mark 10:9).

But in addition to getting the concept of marriage straight, there was an additional question from the Corinthians for Paul to answer: what about a married person who has become a Christian but their partner isn't? (verses 12-16). There seems to be an understanding here that the unbelieving partner is in some sense “defiling” the Christian partner, and so the Christian should get divorced. Paul's explanation of the lifelong nature of marriage answers the question. But he also goes beyond the teaching of Jesus to help people whose marriages are under pressure because one of the partners has become a Christian. The Christian should not choose to opt out of the marriage because their partner doesn't share their faith. But if the *non-Christian partner* separates, “let it be so,” writes Paul (v15); “in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you”. Paul recognises that events sometimes take over, and God's ideal is not met. He is pragmatic in offering practical advice that gives the wronged party to the marriage the ability to hold their head up high and not be emotionally or practically bound to a marriage they can't save. And although this is a specific case that Paul is dealing with, I have found his pastoral sensitivity something to emulate in dealing with other situations of failed marriages. God calls us to peace, which means more than the absence of strife, but wholeness and well-being.

Singleness

We have seen that Paul holds up marriage as good and wholesome, but in this chapter he also says very strongly that it is not for everybody. He himself was not married, and was apparently very happy not being married, so much so that he wishes everyone could enjoy singleness as he does (v7). But he recognises that people have different gifts from God. To both those who are not married, whether never married or single again through bereavement or divorce, he commends the celibate life.

He picks up the theme of singleness again in verses 25 to 38. To the modern reader these verses do read a little strange. Paul is acutely conscious of Christ's promise to return in judgement, and the early Church believed that it was imminent. In verse 29 he says that “the appointed time has grown short”. Thus Paul advises those thinking of getting married to consider not doing so. It may well be that he senses coming persecution in which threats to one's husband or wife could be used to pressurise a Christian to renounce the faith. But the main point is that our focus should be on preparing for the Lord's coming. Whether we are married or single, slave or free means nothing in comparison. We should above all live our lives in the light of our relationship with Christ. “For the present form of this world is passing away” (31).

Although 2000 years later our sense of urgency has somewhat dissipated, I still think that the overriding principle of Paul holds good. What is your primary identity? Wife of so-and-so, son of so-and-so, or child of God and brother of Jesus Christ? In verses 32-35 Paul points out that being married brings new responsibilities and priorities, some of which may at times be in conflict with our service of the Lord. Paul's singleness enabled him to do things and visit

2 Seneca *De Beneficiis* 3.16.2 – quoted in Talbert *Reading Corinthians* (SPCK, 1987)

places that would have been difficult or impossible with a wife and children. And of course, Jesus himself was single, and thus better able to give himself to, and for, others.

As a single lay person in my twenties, I was able to play a much fuller part in my local church, and those years were in some sense a good foundation for my present ministry as a priest. There is a real danger that churches plan a lot of their activities on the assumption that people are in a couple or have families. Sometimes we need single, divorced and widowed people to remind us that they have both needs and a contribution to make. As Paul mentioned in verse 7, "But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind". Singleness is just as much a gift as marriage. The question for all of us, single or married, is whether we will see our situation as a gift, and use it for others and for God.

Conclusion

Perhaps the main challenge from today's reading is for us to look at our own lives and listen to what God might be saying to us from Paul's letter to Corinth. What opportunities for service does our own situation offer? What is preventing us from being wholeheartedly devoted to God? Being open to God like this may be uncomfortable, but if we're willing to shape our lives according to his word the result will always be better. Whatever our lot may be right now, let us put the Lord at the centre of our lives and live them with "undivided devotion" to him (35, NIV).