



Anglican Church of Australia - Diocese of The Murray
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Pastoral letter to the Diocese concerning the marriage postal consultation

Dear sisters and brothers,

At the time of writing it is not yet clear what question will be asked in the forthcoming postal consultation concerning marriage. Whatever the question and where ever a person stands on this emotive subject, it is to be hoped that the coming weeks will be marked by mutual respect and generosity, especially towards those who conscientiously hold views different from our own. One of the defining characteristics of a disciple of Jesus should be how we behave towards those with whom we have fundamental disagreement. Every person irrespective of the race, colour, belief or sexual orientation is a human being whom God loves and calls into relationship with him in Christ. It is our Christian duty to treat all people with respect and honour, recognising their creation in the image and likeness of God.

The purpose of this communication is to provide some general background information that, I believe, should be in the mind of disciples as they come to a decision about which view they should express. Our understanding of marriage within the Church, whilst it claims to be based on natural law, has essential differences from earlier Jewish or pagan practices and it also has distinctive features that are not present in modern secular usage.

Historically marriage has been an accepted social custom with many different forms including monogamy and polygamy. Culturally it has been integral to the fabric of societies as a basic aspect of how relationships develop. Within our own scriptures, the Old Testament testifies to a variety of practices that include both monogamy and polygamy. The New Testament records some teaching from Jesus about marriage and Paul writes extensively about the matter. The biblical material is well known and there are plenty of commentaries and commentators to whom we can turn for explanation. As always, the teaching of the scriptures is our normative starting point plus how these teachings have been interpreted over the centuries in the Tradition of the Church. There are many helpful resources available in this regard but the Diocese of Sydney web site has some material on both the matter of same sex marriage and also, and importantly, concerning the background understanding about gender as gift of God in creation.

Christian practice across 2000 years has varied and it is beyond the scope of this communication to do justice to the ways in which the Tradition has been passed from one generation to another. There are differences of approach to the matter both within denominations and between denominations which depend, amongst other things, upon whether marriage is understood to be a sacrament, have sacramental quality or is simply a contract plus a blessing. Notwithstanding the variety of approaches it is not stretching understanding to say that, as far as the Church is concerned, it has been invariable practice to define our understanding of marriage as being between one man and one woman voluntarily entered into for life to the exclusion of all others. Different denominations at various times have approached the question of what to do (if anything) when a marriage fails but, even allowing for a variety of practices over the breakdown of marriage, they do nothing to change the foundational understanding of its nature as being between a man and a woman. The complementary relationship

between two different but equal genders is seen as the way for human beings to share in God's creativity by procreation. The potential for this is basic to a Christian understanding of the nature of men and women and integral to the married relationship. It is true to say that marriage understood in this way has been seen as the basic building block of society, at least in the Western world, for centuries.

Contrary to some modern commentators, it cannot be maintained that there is no such thing as Christian marriage. In the Western world marriage has been seen as Christian for a very long time. This is not to say that marriage did not feature in cultures that pre-dated Christ (and the people of Israel for that matter) nor can we assert that language does not develop and therefore that the meaning of words can be differently understood through the passage of time. However, proposed developments in this area need to be understood as being fundamentally at odds with the inherited understanding of the particular word, marriage. This is true even without the addition of the adjective, Christian, and all that pertains to that as it has been lived and experienced since the preaching of the Apostles and how such understandings have been formative in most cultures, certainly our own. To extend its meaning as is being proposed currently in many countries is to make a word bear understandings that are totally contrary to the word's accepted meaning. It is hard to see how marriage as a descriptor of a human relationship can be applied in ways contrary to the accepted meaning of the word.

Our inheritance of this institution and the way it has been interpreted until comparatively recently, has been essentially within the Judeo-Christian tradition which, as indicted earlier, is not one consistent approach. This does not however deny the fact that the very word marriage has been invested with meaning and understanding that has Christian influences at its very heart. Marriage, as it has been lived and understood in Western culture for a very long time, is between one man and one woman, by definition. As lived and understood within the Church this has always been so and this will remain our position irrespective of the decisions and declarations of others.

The college of priests of the Diocese have been thinking about how we, as the Church of The Murray, should approach the celebration of marriage. In the fairly near future the fruit of this deliberation will be published. I reproduce here a part of the work which sets out what we believe about the subject.

Christian Marriage

Based on the Preface of the Marriage Service (AAPB)

Christian marriage is the public joining together of one man and one woman in the sight of God.

Our Lord Jesus Christ said of marriage that 'From the beginning of creation God made them male and female. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one." So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder'. (Mark 10:6-9, Matt 19:4-6, Gen 1:27, Gen 2:24)

Marriage is the sign and image of God's unending love for his people, (Is 54:5, Is 62:3-5, Jer 2:2,3,32, Jer 31:31-34, Ezek 16:8-14, Hosea 2:14-20) and of the union between Christ and his Church. (Matt 9:15, Matt 22:1-3, Matt 25:1-13, John 3:28-30, John 14:1-3, John 17:20-26, 1 Cor 6:16-18, 2 Cor 11:2, Eph 5:32, Rev 19:6-9, Rev 21: 1-4, 9-14)

So Saint Paul teaches that the husband must love his wife as Christ loved the Church, and that the wife must give due honour to her husband. (Eph 5:21-33)

Marriage should be honoured by all, (Heb 13:4, 1 Thess 4:3-8) and is not to be entered into lightly or carelessly, but with reverent and serious respect for those purposes for which it was instituted by God.

Marriage is a gift from God for the well-being of mankind, and for the proper expression of natural instincts and affections with which he has endowed us.

*It is a life-long, exclusive union, only terminated by death, in which a man and a woman are called so to give themselves in body (1 Cor 7:2-5), mind, and spirit, and so to respond, that from their union will grow a deepening knowledge and love of each other. (Song of Solomon)
In the joys and sorrows of life, in prosperity and adversity, they share their companionship, faithfulness, and strength. (Gen 2:18, Gen 24:67, 2 Sam 12:24)*

In marriage a new family is established in accordance with God's purpose, so that children may be born and nurtured in secure and loving care, for their well-being and instruction, and for the good order of society, to the glory of God. (Gen 1:28, Mal 2:15)

The church provides an act of worship in which a man and a woman can receive God's blessing on their life together, so that they may fulfil his purpose for them, and be supported by the prayers of God's people.

The services provided by the church for the celebration of marriage witnesses to the above teaching, and its expectation is that those who come to the church to be married believe in the Christian faith and accept the church's teaching on marriage.

I hope that the above (when taken with material from commentaries and commentators referred to earlier in this document) gives you the basic biblical material for prayerful consideration. In order that this communication does not get unmanageably long, I refer you to a publication from the Roman Catholic Australian Bishops Conference entitled "Don't mess with marriage". It is available here <https://www.catholic.org.au/marriage/don-t-mess-with-marriage>. This is excellent and bears detailed attention by us all.

I trust that the people of the Diocese will participate in this ongoing debate and, as I said at the beginning, do so in a way that respects different opinions. However, there are matters that the Church holds as unchanging. For many the questions before us are included within the Tradition that we are called upon to receive, inhabit and pass on to future generations. Others interpret these matters as being open to change and development. It is clear to me that these times are presenting us with acute challenges. This has been the case in the past and our forebears in the faith have often paid a high price for maintaining the truth of the gospel in the face of hostile opposition. Whether these matters are an equivalent for us in our generation remains to be seen. I am reminded of the words of Jesus, "I am the way, and the truth and the life." If one wants the truth about who we are and what we are destined for, it is Jesus Christ who teaches us. If one wants to know the way to travel through this world and have a future in the next, he is the way. If one wants to be filled with his life, it is from him that we receive it; to do so is to follow faithfully where he has gone before.

I hope this can be received in the spirit in which it is written, to help us all engage with the matters at hand and to do so prayerfully and in an informed way.

With my love, prayers and every blessing,

