

# Marriage: a vital building block in social structure

**An open letter to Mark Coulton MP, Member for Parkes, from the Rt Revd Ian Palmer, Bishop of Bathurst and Rector of Dubbo**

Dear Mark,

I'm taking the liberty of writing to you since a website about Marriage Equality says that you are one of the members of Parliament who are undecided on this issue.

An Anglican bishop writing about marriage needs to be careful, after all in 16<sup>th</sup> Century England our church broke away from the Roman church because of King Henry VIII – a man with six wives!

Of course, the church does not own marriage. Marriage, of a man and a woman in a life-long relationship is a pre-Christian, pre-political institution. It has been a building block of society down the centuries and across the world. Even civilisations that have had strong homosexual relationships, like ancient Greece, have kept marriage for a man and a woman.

In fact one of the challenges we face in Australia is that our country is host to people from around 200 different countries, most of which do not support same-sex marriage. These include many thousands of vulnerable people who don't have much of a voice. Those advocating marriage equality conveniently forget that of the 193 countries represented in the United Nations only 19 have agreed to same-sex marriage.

The catch-cry "marriage equality" has an immediate appeal to it. Justice demands that I treat people fairly, but not always the same. Difference is also important. I do not march on ANZAC Day because I've never served with the ADF nor been a cadet. However, I'm no less an Australian citizen than they are, with similar privileges and responsibilities but our lives have taken different routes.

The church teaches that every person is unique and special, created in the image of God and loved by God. Therefore, I oppose intolerance, unfairness, bigotry, homophobia or vilification of any kind. I support people in same-sex relationships having the same rights and privileges as those who are married. My concern is that marriage is different to other relationships: like a bolt is different to a nail but no less useful.

In Australia, the 1961 Marriage Act did not define marriage because everyone knew what marriage is. In 2004 when the definition "the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life" was inserted into the Act, no Member of Parliament voted against it. Marriage has been an institution in a wide variety of cultures, not because it describes a love-relationship between a man and a woman, but because it protects vulnerable people, especially women and children.

As a marriage celebrant I've taken the weddings of hundreds of couples, very many of whom have lived together for years. But when children have been planned or born, the couples come wanting to marry so that their children have a family unit to belong to – it's for the child's well-being and protection.

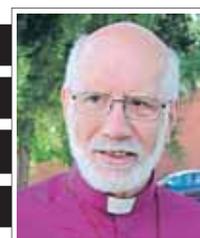
***Despite what is so often said, there is overwhelming evidence that children fare best when raised in a loving relationship by their natural parents.***

That's what marriage is about. Despite what is so often said, there is overwhelming evidence that children fare best when raised in a loving relationship by their natural parents. Children, growing up, want a father and a mother.

People say that, "if two people love each other they should be allowed to marry." It sounds fair but it is not the reason for marriage. The word "love" does not appear as a prerequisite in the Marriage Act! In the Anglican Marriage Service the couple do not express love but rather make a legal and binding commitment to each other for the good of society and the benefit of their children.

That's what marriage is about; it's about connecting things that are often fragmented: sex and love, male and female, sex and babies, parents and children. The teaching of the Old Testament, Jesus and St Paul, that in marriage two "opposites" become "one flesh" is profoundly true and not confined to Christianity.

BY  
BISHOP  
IAN  
PALMER



In some ways, it's a pity I need to write to you about this matter because on the surface there are far more pressing matters, like employment security in regional Australia, the recognition of indigenous people or the treatment of refugees and children in detention.

However, this issue is important because a redefinition of marriage will change our society's understanding of family and relationships. In addition, it will put the church in a difficult place because, while we have always supported marriage, we may have to discriminate about which marriages we support. Instead of being an advocate for marriage the church may be seen as a 'spoiler'.

Perhaps more dangerously, 'marriage equality' has been heralded as a move towards tolerance and respect. Despite assurances to the contrary, in countries where gay people are allowed to marry, those who, on grounds of conscience, refuse to supply services for same-sex weddings are already being discriminated against and vilified.

The word 'marriage' has a very long history with a particular meaning. Friendships are essential for our welfare but they are different. Marriage is a covenant between a husband and wife to live exclusively with each other and provide a place of security where children can be born and nurtured.

I trust that this is helpful.

With every good wish,

*+ Ian Palmer*

— Anglican —

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**Editor:**

Lew Hitchcock 62 6331 1722

**email:**

anglican.news@bathurstanglican.org.au

**Web:**

http://www.bathurstanglican.org.au/

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