

The Queen and the humanity of marriage

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The Diamond Wedding anniversary for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip represents quite an achievement. The celebration of sixty years of marriage is bound to become increasingly unusual as people marry later and as more marriages dissolve in separation and divorce, despite increasing life-spans.

Those who watch the English royals are touched by this public moment in their personal lives. Promises made long ago in public, when Elizabeth was radiant and Philip dashing, have been kept through six decades of triumph and trouble. Despite their wealth and privilege, we glimpse after a moment's imagination the stresses this relationship has seen.

Some may take Philip and Elizabeth Windsor's anniversary as a sign of times past—the remnant of a culture that thought differently about marriage. Yet it is perhaps worth pausing to remember something of this culture where the relationship began. Like all human times and places, that society was fallen and broken in its own way. But it took its cues for marriage from the history of Christian thought, in which marriage was understood to have three purposes:

- 1. Steadfast, lifelong companionship and support.** In biblical thought (especially Hosea, Ephesians 5, and Revelation 19), this 'steadfastness' is modelled upon God himself, who firmly commits to people who don't deserve it, and who is determined to bring about the best for them. Married people copy this God and care for the other, whatever his or her strengths and weakness, with repentance and forgiveness taking the relationship through times of selfishness and sin.
- 2. The proper home for sexual love,** exclusively and for the purpose of strengthening the relationship. In biblical thought, it is not *individuals* who have sexual needs, as if we are each like cars that need fuel. Rather, each *marriage* has a sexual need. In marriage, a new social unit is formed, which sexual love builds and strengthens through the long-haul (cf. Genesis 2:23-25, and 1 Corinthians 7:3-5).
- 3. An openness to welcoming children.** Although no biblical author sees married people as any less married when there are no children, children are always seen as an uncomplicated blessing. Some think this optimism simply results from ancient near eastern couples living in a sparsely populated environment, and having no 'choice' about children. But it goes much deeper than that. The blessing of children first appears amongst God's good creation of a beautiful earth (Genesis 1:28a), and provocatively, is almost presented as a human continuation of that work. Subsequently, children are yearned for and wanted (e.g. Psalm 127).

Philip and Elizabeth were married in this milieu, according to rites that celebrated and set these three purposes before them.

Yet over the six decades that followed they also experienced the dark side of marriage, both in the very public dissolution of the marriages of their children, and (we may safely presume) in the privacy of their own marriage.

In celebrating the biblical authors' honour of marriage, we can miss the Bible's equally frank admission that all married couples stumble through marriage outside of Eden, in a fallen world marred by sin and selfishness. There is a tragic sense in which we can always see the seeds of divorce in every marriage, even the very 'best' marriage. As Jesus put it to men who had become casual about marriage, 'because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so' (Matthew 19:8). This aspect of the humanity of marriage makes it a mystery how any couple lasts.

Christians seek for God's Spirit to change them into people who bring love, patience, kindness and humility (Galatians 5:22-23) into what can be an otherwise painful relationship. Whether Philip and Elizabeth have called out to God for his Spirit in this way, is their business.

But we might also wonder whether their marriage was better supported by a culture that believed it had three purposes. Although it is presumptuous to make claims about what a whole culture ‘thinks’, it nevertheless seems that we live in a culture that has reduced the purposes of marriage to some fragments, such as conditional companionship and temporary sexual exclusivity. On this view of marriage, sexual expression is not particularly ‘for’ marriage. It can be had without marriage, and when it is had within marriage, it is to meet the ‘needs’ of each individual (not so much the need of the marriage itself). The commitment continues as long as each considers it advantageous, and children are just an optional choice. As Wendell Berry dryly puts it,

Marriage, in what is evidently its most popular version, is now on the one hand an intimate ‘relationship’ involving (ideally) two successful careerists in the same bed, and on the other hand a sort of private political system in which rights and interests must be asserted and defended. Marriage, in other words, has now taken the form of divorce: a prolonged and impassioned negotiation as to how things shall be divided. During their understandably temporary association, the ‘married’ couple will typically consume a large quantity of merchandise and a large portion of each other. (Wendell Berry, *What are People For?* London: Routledge, 1990, 180)

This assessment may gloss over the many couples who see things differently. Even so, that such thinking can easily be found in our culture indicates one way in which it has simply become harder to stay married: married people cannot so much rely upon the supports of a community. Of course something has been gained: men and women in ugly, abusive relationships may now more easily find the ‘peace’ which God wants for people (1 Corinthians 7:15). But something has been lost: we are now less likely to gently but firmly call each other to continue in keeping, through repentance and forgiveness, the public promises we once made.

When a society privileges marriage, it engages in a form of ‘positive discrimination’ that upholds as amazing this incredible project of living out marriage’s threefold form of life. It is in many ways such a hard task that a community can surround each married couple with respect and affirmation, with laws and conventions that makes a special place for what they do. That attitude has been lost in Western societies that want simply to neutrally observe marriage as one among many social arrangements.

But Christian communities keep struggling and wrestling to show what it looks like to ‘honour marriage’ (Hebrews 13:4)—all the time remaining in deep fellowship with single people and with those who are separated or divorced. Christian churches keep seeking to be places where the full three purposes of marriage are upheld. Its dark side is frankly admitted yet resisted, and we discover a way of being that reflects God’s way of being – the God who lovingly keeps His promises.

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Sources/Further Reading:

Wendell Berry, *What are People For?* London: Routledge, 1990, p. 180.

Ash, Christopher. *Married for God*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007.

Cameron, A., *Family: A Christian Approach*: Newtown: SIE, 2005. www.moorebooks.com.au

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