

IMAGE OF REDEMPTIVE LOVE

By JOSEPH LAISHLEY

IT IS NOT reading and speculating, but living and dying and being re-born which makes a real theologian'. These words of Martin Luther make a very good motto, not only for the professional theologian, but also for all who at any time reflect on the meaning and action of God in our lives and are thus implicitly theologians. For it is life itself which mediates the living knowledge of God for us, and a first principle in sacramental theology today is that it is the world, the human world, which is the basic sacrament, that is, the basic medium for making visible and for embodying the desire of the Father to give himself to beings other than himself. We have become accustomed to speaking of Christ as the sacrament of God in this sense. But since 'in Christ all things were created' (cf Col 1,16), from the very creation of the world everything and above all the human, personal world exists in the Word, is already in Christ. Therefore to become fully human is to become Christlike since Christ is the original and we the image of humanness. Living our human lives is the one way to become at one with the Father in Christ.¹

And so the first thing the theologian wishes to say to the married is, 'You do not have to do something *else* in order to live the sacrament of marriage, something other than your ordinary human lives with their joys and sorrows, their good times and their bad'. The idea that we live for the most part in a purely natural world, of doubtful relevance to salvation, and therefore must work to add something extra to our lives (a good intention?) in order to be pleasing to God, in order to be Christlike, is the result of a dying, and by now (one hopes) dead, late-mediaeval theology of grace. In fact, however, we live in a fundamentally graced world, for 'the ultimate calling of all is one and divine'. 'Nature' is itself the first grace, is the product of the creative act by which God makes a world of human beings for the purpose of a personal, loving dialogue with his own triune family of persons. 'Grace' more intimately understood is God's own self-giving ('uncreated grace') and it is the effect of this personal love which transforms us and our world and which we call

sanctifying grace. Grace in these three related senses is God's gift to us human beings and makes us what we are — human: we do not have to become something else.

This might raise the question: 'What then is the specific contribution of christian sacramental life to our living in the world if grace in its varying forms is a condition of all our life on this earth?' But I want to leave this for the moment. More important right now is the filling out of what Luther said: ' . . . (it is) living and dying and being re-born which makes a real theologian'. He might have said: 'a real human being'. The whole pattern of our life from birth to death and beyond, and hence a great part of married life, is the constant process of expansion and growth, of contraction and decay leading to new life experiences. We do not die once only; we do not rise to newness of life once only; 'we die daily' and are re-born in growing through the stages of human development, through childhood to adolescence, to (one hopes) increasing levels of maturity. The dynamic of growth, decay and new integration is a familiar field for the explorations of psychologists.² Furthermore, these stages of growth and transition we celebrate naturally as human beings either with gladness or sorrow: birthdays, coming of age, marriage, the birth of children, sickness and recovery and finally death. This human ritual or formal celebration is likewise treated illuminatingly by sociologists and anthropologists.³ But my main point is that this dynamic growth, and these ritual celebrations of life are the 'stuff', the basic materials, of christian sacrament, which is a celebration of moments of life lived either explicitly or implicitly in the struggle to become Christlike.

This mention of 'sacrament' leads us to return to the question left unanswered above: what is the specifically christian contribution to the living of human life in a 'godly' way? Well, even if grace conditions our whole existence, it is clear that this fact is by no means everywhere obvious or recognized. The task of theological reflection is to direct attention to these deep aspects of reality which can easily be overlooked or ignored in the struggles of living. And in this respect every Christian is a theologian. In fact, in the perspective I have outlined the christian community as a whole exists to call attention to, and witness to, what it is to be fully human, where 'fully human' is understood to mean Christlike: Christlike in the search for truth, in compassion, in liberating others from the unfreedom which binds us, in a word, Christlike in love. The Church, then, in its constant search for the fully human in this sense

is a prism of humanity. And this is simply to say what Vatican II said of the Church: that it is sign or sacrament (a visible embodiment) of salvation; not the sole place or sole source, but a focal point of the work of God in Christ.⁴ Then we can begin to see that christian sacramental life is the celebration of vital moments of human 'living and dying and being re-born', deeply and effectively illuminated by the creative light of the Word of God made flesh. Sacraments celebrate life, seen at its full depth in Christ, within the community called Church in witness to this life.

What, then, have we said so far about the sacrament of marriage? Why, that it is simply the life of married people, celebrated in its inception and lived out through the years, but with an explicit Christ-like depth. All the experience of ordinary human beings, all the expertise of psychologists and sociologists and the rest, all is the material of christian marriage when seen in the light of Christ. Not just the wedding ceremony. But the wedding is the natural (and graced) celebration of a life-process which has already begun in the intimate acquaintance of the couple and goes on in hope, 'till death us do part'. It goes on through the very growth process of tensions experienced and resolved, through crises and the cementing of the relationship between husband and wife, for it is the relationship as lived out at its full depth which images forth the life of God.

Marriage as image and as covenant

It is this theme of image which sums up the christian meaning of marriage in our present perspective and it is also the most traditional of themes, but seen now with new eyes. We will see how the creation of the human race in his own image and likeness provides the ground for the covenant of love between God and humanity in Christ, and between man and woman in marriage as a paradigm or key example of this covenant of love. This will, it is hoped, provide insight into the meaning of Vatican II's description of marriage as a covenant of love, and its canonical definition as a community of life and love.

The biblical creation story (Gen 1,26-28; 2,23ff) provides the foundation of christian reflection on the human reality that is marriage and it sees it in the context of human relationships as a whole. Exegetes seem to agree (here I speak as one less wise, not being an exegete) that the literal meaning of the text interprets 'image' in terms of dominion or lordship over the earth. God is Lord and human being are lords. Sexual duality exists in view of multiplication to fill the earth and subdue it.

But further reflection suggests that there are other thoughts struggling to get out. Because the ancients thought in concrete not in abstract terms (of man and God, not of humanity and divinity), the visible, concrete duality of male and female can be seen as a way of trying to speak of the more elusive personal relationships between man and woman. Without a reflexive concept of person (but knowing inarticulately what being a person is), a concrete symbol, sexual duality, was used to embody deeper but merely inchoate ideas. Along these lines, pursuing half-expressed thoughts, the image of God can be seen to lie in relationship, the personal relationship of a man and a woman being the paradigm to indicate that human beings are made in the image of a personal God, personally related to his creation.

A further flood of light is thrown on the image of God in humanity by the later, christian, clarification of the being of God as three Persons-in-relation in a unity of nature. The image then stands out still more strikingly in this later perspective as actually being a reflection of the triune life of God. Human beings are persons, are beings-in-relationship, because God is like that too, is Persons-in-relationship. Another way of saying this is that human beings in their inmost reality are loving beings made for the give and take of loving relationships by a God who himself is Love. The 'God is Love' of John's first letter (1 Jn 4,8 and 16) contains and conceals the revelation of God's own three-fold life. As Julian of Norwich was to learn many centuries later, 'Love is his meaning' and love is our meaning also, since we are made in Love's image. Marriage between woman and man is thus a paradigm of humanness itself, of being image of God, of being person-in-relationship. And the goal of all human endeavour can be summed up in Augustine's famous phrase: 'Become what you are'.

In this way the foundation is laid for using the central biblical theme of covenant in relation to marriage. The very term 'Testament' (Old and New) translated from its latin form means covenant, covenant between God and humanity in creation, covenant between God and Israel ('You will be my people and I will be your God'), and new covenant foreshadowed in Jeremiah (31,31ff) and in christian vision fulfilled in Christ. The roots of the imagery of covenant may perhaps lie in the treaties struck by benevolent but despotic kings and their subject peoples, but the bible transmutes the imagery in its constant use into the vehicle to express the personal love story of God's relationships with humanity

in all its moods. Love for the bible is thus the foundation of covenant and frequently in the biblical history the familiar model of marriage is used to illustrate facets of this relationship between God and his people. As a result, since likeness works two ways, marriage came to be seen as itself reflecting the covenant of God with humanity and of God with Israel. Marriage as the embodiment of the image of God in humanity becomes marriage as embodiment of the covenant. It is seen as a covenant of love.

Most important for christian reflection here is the passage in Ephesians (5,21-33) which refers the mystery of marriage portrayed in Genesis (2,24) to the relationship between Christ and the Church (Eph 5,32). The new covenant of God with humanity expressed in the relationship between Christ and the Church is itself expressed in bridal imagery (5,26-27); and again, since likeness works two ways, the ideal of marriage itself is seen as modelled on the love of Christ for the Church (e.g. 5,25).

The sacramental nature of marriage was at one time deduced all too easily from this passage. The latin reading of 'mystery' is *sacramentum*. 'Marriage is a great sacrament'. The conclusion seemed obvious, but it was a conclusion sadly belied by the struggle marriage experienced to gain acceptance as an effective manifestation of grace during the first millenium of the Church's history. Only in the later twelfth century did it begin to appear regularly alongside baptism, eucharist and the rest as a sacrament, (though this was at least partly due to the fact that the seven sacraments as such only emerged in settled form about this time). Nevertheless, there are more substantial grounds for seeing this passage as crucial for grounding later reflection on christian marriage as a sacramental covenant of love. Christ, the sacrament or effective embodiment of God in our midst eternally loves his bride, the Church, which he cherishes as his own Body (Eph 5,29-30). The Church in a word, is sacrament of Christ and Christians 'body forth' — give visible expression to — the Christ-life which is latent in a redeemed humanity.

Marriage once again, and christian marriage above all, in its clarity and explicitness of ideal, serves as paradigm, as key example, of this truth. Christian marriage focuses for all the deepest meaning of human love as image of the love of God now seen to be summed up in Christ and expressed centrally through the Church. Marriage, therefore, does not simply point to Church (as Body of Christ), nor is it simply modelled on the love of Christ for the Church. It is Church, it is Body of Christ in this home, in this street. It is the

domestic Church which in its myriad forms constitutes the universal Church which is the sacrament of salvation. This is the sort of way in which further reflection on Ephesians 5 leads to a developed sacramental notion of marriage, and brings the Christ-life into the very human setting of the home in explicit form.

Implications

So far we have been presenting a view of marriage in contemporary theology which stresses the human (and therefore christlike), and the personal (both individual and social). In fact, marriage can be described as a web of loving relationships — of wife with husband, of parents with children, of family with the wider society of neighbourhood, Church and state, and of all persons with God. This latter relationship provides the full depth and meaning of the other aspects by exploring the themes of image and covenant. This stress on relationships is a response to the present situation where marriage, like most of our varied forms of life, social institutions and personal identities is in crisis in a rapidly changing world. This fact of change affects marriage in a number of important ways. We see the break-up of stable social units, above all of the extended family in which all members contribute to a network of mutual support. In its place we have the nuclear family of husband, wife and two or three children. All the burdens of the relationship are carried by what is often a very isolated and ill-equipped couple. They have little but their personal resources to sustain them and the strain is often too much. The very fluidity of circumstances and world events creates an atmosphere of impermanence, with the result that fewer are prepared to commit themselves to the risk of fidelity. It is questioned whether permanence is possible. And many other factors including change in the status of women (and hence of men also) and a degree of technological control of our environment and bodily make-up hitherto undreamed of, all contribute to pose problems for the stability of marriage.

In the past, theological reflection on marriage was pursued in a more stable setting. It concentrated on certain aspects which seemed most relevant at the time, namely the social values of marriage and its contribution to maintaining stability. Thus it tended to subordinate the couple to their sociological role, and first and foremost to the continuance of the family, the nation, the human race. This led to a pronounced emphasis on the procreative aspect of marriage which was spoken of as the 'primary end of marriage' — a

term no longer in use — and the reflection was guided by a simple natural law morality which tended to ‘read off’ the law of behaviour in marriage from human sexual biology.

But the factors in the situation today already mentioned have all tended in one direction: to lead Christians to reflect, as we have been doing, on a deeper, indeed the deepest dimension of marriage, in inter-personal relationships of love. This alone seems capable of meeting present needs and providing guidelines for social involvement directed to strengthening marriage. This type of reflection, it is believed, will offer real support to the small family unit thrown back on its own resources of personality by giving insight into the deepest meaning of marriage, into the dynamic of love which is available to us as human beings, and thus giving also a yardstick for judging projects for social change affecting marriage.

Only some of the further implications of this view can be highlighted here. The first emphasis is on the primacy of love and this implies a study in depth of just what love means, not only in terms of emotion (though this is vitally important) but also in terms of the more general, constant give and take, the finding of truth and freedom for the other and for oneself. Growth in maturity here, at the heart of the relationship, means the abandonment of the search to manipulate or overpower the other, but the pursuit of the search to learn gradually to trust the powerlessness of love. In this context it is important to stress the healing nature of the sacrament. Persons come to marriage with a whole history of experience behind them. For none of us has that experience been wholly positive. Not only our own failures to love, not only those of others most intimately associated with our history, but the dead weight of innumerable situations which are beyond our control has burdened us. Marriage provides many new opportunities to re-learn primal trust in other persons without which we diminish as human beings. And these opportunities include, for no marriage is a fulfilment of the ideal, occasions to learn afresh the art of forgiveness through understanding the frailties of the other and one’s own need of forgiveness. A measure of the tragedy of marital breakdown is that it entails the collapse of these fragile efforts to restore the damaged image, to enter the new covenant of love afresh.

The theme of the covenant of love expresses the sacramental value of marriage, however, on two, and not merely on one, level. On the first level the sacrament is the living relationship between two people. From this point of view, the man and woman confer the

sacrament on each other and are committed to living it out each day. The presence of the priest as the official witness of the community is designed to express the community's concern over and interest in the marriage. It is not a purely private event. But both the couple, as forming the domestic Church, and the wider community, are sacrament of the faithful promise of God, who is wedded to humanity in Christ as we have explored above. And this second deeper level, which enshrines the transcendent love of God embodied in the relationship, leads us to consider the implications of the theme of 'covenant of love' for the permanence of marriage in a theological reflection.

The promise of permanence highlights the basic paradox of human existence. Called to a life of communion with God, we are yet unable to reach that goal on our own, out of our own created resources, even though these themselves are god-given. The reason for this, and why things must be so, is that our nature is to be loving beings, and that is to say 'beings in relationship', dependent for our realization on love received and given. In promising fidelity we become only too conscious that we do not have in hand the power to fulfil the promise. We make it in hope and trust in a power greater than ours, and explicitly in the Love which is 'his meaning'. This promise, therefore, does in itself disclose a divine depth to our being, but the question today is: 'Is such a promise possible?' In the past, the christian, and especially the roman catholic answer has been to reply affirmatively, but to place the permanence in a supernatural bond created by the promise of God and which continues to exist even if the relationship of husband and wife has broken down. The sacramental theology I have been using affirms with equal force the permanence of marriage arising out of the promise of God, but it offers a different line of insight. It opens up afresh the whole dimension of marriage as a living ideal, ever to be found anew. An ideal in this sense is a goal never fully possessed but worked towards, like peace, justice and truth (all values also proclaimed in the sermon on the mount). Yet although not fully possessed, it is not remote and unreal (even though we often use the word 'ideal' of what is quite out of reach). A genuine ideal actually exists and is effective in our lives to the degree that we work towards realizing it. The permanence of marriage, then, will be seen to follow, not from the presence of a supernatural, indissoluble bond, which takes no account of the living (or dead) relationship between husband and wife), but from the open-ended nature of god-given human love in

which the divine meaning for mankind is embodied. In other words, marriage will be seen to be permanent, not because of a lifelong bond in some way independent of the mutual commitment of the couple, but because love is of its nature faithful and unconditioned and never says, 'so far and no further'. What we are calling love, therefore, is the open-ended and faithful commitment to another 'till death do us part'. Love is of its nature permanent, so there is no question, in christian vision, of simply 'giving it a try'. But nonetheless, if permanence is an ideal of this sort (and this reflects the view of the early centuries of the Church, for which the quality of permanence meant not that a marriage could not, but that it should not, come to an end), then failure is a possibility. Married love can and does fail, in spite of high ideals, and the crisis of the present lies in the fact that it seems to fail with increasing frequency. It is the task of other articles to explore this matter (and perhaps this article is best seen as an agenda for the whole issue). But one or two points should be made in conclusion. The christian community cannot pass, or endorse, a law *allowing* divorce, for no one, not even God, can let human beings off the ideals built into our nature, but it should see as a first priority assistance to those whose marriages are in danger. And where there is failure and this is followed by re-marriage, the theology outlined here suggests that, even though the original failure is a permanent part of a person's history as are all our own failures, it is possible to seek not endorsement but forgiveness for that failure from the community and be accorded the sign of reconciliation in the eucharist. This implication has not yet been accepted into official thinking, which is by nature conservative, but the practice of pastoral care for the re-married (including admission to communion) is becoming increasingly common.

And so our thinking has come full circle. 'Living our human lives is the one way to become at one with the Father in Christ'. And an essential ingredient of at-one-ment is reconciliation.

NOTES

¹ This is true not only for Christians. See *Gaudium et Spes*, section 22, in *Vatican Council II, the conciliar and post-conciliar documents*, ed. Austin Flannery O.P. (Leominster, England), p 924.

² Cf e.g. *Childhood and Society* by Erik Erikson, chapter 8.

³ Cf e.g. *The Ritual Process* by Victor Turner.

⁴ Cf e.g. *Lumen Gentium*, section 1. See Austin Flannery, *op. cit.*, p 350.