

The Threefold Cord: A Wedding Sermon

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“Marriage is Hell,” wrote Kathryn Perutz.

“To be married means, too often, a capitulation to sameness, an end to self-development, and unnatural death of spirit... It means the end of friendships that require sacrifice, and the end of risks. It leads to self-pity and over-consumption, to a conservatism that is moral and emotional as well as political and social. After a time, it brings out crazy fears of abandonment, of not being able to cope, of change, of desertion by children, of insufficiency. It causes the premature deaths of mind and soul through sexual rot and ploys for power. The expectations of marriage, dreamy and filmy, become a web to imprison the self”.

Gosh, you may say, is marriage such a good idea after all? Thank God there are plenty willing to recommend it.

Karl Marx, who was not known for his conservative views about life, was nonetheless very positive when it came to the idea of a couple being committed to one another for life. After thirteen years of marriage he wrote to his beloved Jenny:

“There are actually many females in the world, and some of them are beautiful. But where could I find again a face, whose every feature, even every wrinkle, is a reminder of the greatest and sweetest memories of my life?”

Sadly, there are times when for some couples marriage becomes hell. But that is not necessarily so. For many of us marriage is a great adventure, which, far from stunting us as individuals, has enabled us to grow and develop, and enjoy God’s world to the full.

I want to look at some of the benefits of marriage on the basis of Ecclesiastes 4.9-12. “Two are better off than one,” says the writer of this book.

1. “If one of them falls down, the other can help him up. But if someone is alone and falls, it’s just too bad, because there is no one to help him” (v10).

If you go out for a hike and twist your ankle, it makes such a difference if someone else is there to support you and help you back home.

However, I want to apply the words metaphorically. At the moment all is hunky-dory for you - there are no clouds upon the horizon. But if your life together is going to be like that of most of us, then you’ll also have your fair share of difficulties along the way.

The time may come when one or other of you finds difficulty in getting or keeping a job. Or the health of one or other of your may break down, or some other crisis may develop. And what then? At those times you'll be glad you have one another, because you will be able to help one another.

2. "If it is cold, two can sleep together and stay warm, but how can you keep warm by yourself?" (v11).

Married couples don't need hot-water bottles - they have one another.

But there is also a metaphorical truth here too. When life is hard and tough, when perhaps hopes do not materialise, couples can encourage one another, they can warm one another's spirits.

3. "Two people can resist an attack that would defeat one person alone" (v12). By and large muggers don't attack people when they are together - they attack people on their own. But if they do, then a couple are more likely to ward off the attacker than if they were on their own. There is strength in togetherness.

And this is true of life in general. When difficulties press in, a couple are able to stand where individuals might fall.

Yes, there are real advantages to marriage - but these advantages do not come just by going through a wedding ceremony. These advantages come as you begin to share your life with one another. In marriage, says the Bible, "the two become one".

In one sense Perutz was right. Marriage is the loss of independence. From now on you must consult one another, listen to one another, adjust to one another's pace and style, and keep faith with one another's trust.

But the loss of independence is mutual. There is no question of one exploiting the other. Rather it is a matter of both husband and wife gaining mutual benefit from their union.

There are times, however, when a twosome is not enough. The writer of Ecclesiastes therefore offers a piece of homespun advice: "A threefold cord is not quickly broken" (4.12b). He is referring to the fact that a piece of wool by itself has little strength. Two strands of wool, however, have more strength, and three-ply wool is much stronger still. And what is true of wool is true of other materials too. Ropes which have to take a heavy strain normally have at least three strands.

But what else has the writer in mind?

Some have suggested that he is saying, "Have a baby and make it a threesome"!

I prefer to see a reference to God. God is the third strand in the relationship. God is saying to you "Include me in". A marriage is so much stronger when God is included. Amidst the storms of life such a marriage can hold.

In a sense you have included God in your marriage by making your vows in this church. You didn't have to do that. Certainly in the UK increasing numbers of couples are dispensing with a church wedding. But you decided you wanted to be married in the sight of God, for you wanted consciously to make your vows to one another in God's sight.

But a church wedding is no guarantee that your marriage won't become hell and eventually break down. It's not enough to begin with God. You need to go on with God. God needs to be included not just today, but every today. He needs to become the added dimension to your relationship. For "a threefold cord is not easily broken".

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