

## **21<sup>st</sup> Feburary 2021 10 am The Importance of Marriage – Imaging God**

Service led by Revd. Andrew Attwood, including interview with Karen about God at Work, and Bible readings. Talk by Graham Archer, Intercessions by Karen and Marcus.

*This transcript is only of the readings and the talk*

### **1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Genesis 1:26-31 [NIVUK 1984]**

26 Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’

27 So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’

29 Then God said, ‘I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. 30 And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground – everything that has the breath of life in it – I give every green plant for food.’ And it was so.

31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning – the sixth day.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: Galatians 3:23-29 [NIVUK 1984]**

23 Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. 24 So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.

25 Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

26 You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, 27 for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.

### **Talk: The Importance of Marriage – Imaging God**

[Andrew:] So perhaps if Graham can join us now I'll just pray briefly for Graham, and I'll hand over to him. Hi Graham, let me just pray for you now.

[Graham:] Thanks.

[Andrew:]

Lord Jesus, thank You for Graham, and thank You for the preparation he has done for today's talk. I pray that we would have our ears wide open to hear what he is saying, and that You would help us to discern what You are saying through him. So bless him and strengthen him as he speaks, in Jesus' name.  
Amen.

[Graham Archer:]

Amen. Well good morning everybody! I realised in my notes in this talk, I started by saying, “It's nice to see you,” but actually I can't, so I look forward to the day when we're in the same space and can actually see each other, and maybe be restored a bit in our connections with each other, because that's, that's what the Gospel is about, the relational thing.

Thank you to Andrew for giving me the opportunity to launch this series on marriage. And we always come to that topic with filters that are shaded by our own experience. So I ought to start by acknowledging my own filter, before perhaps recognising some of the others that might be present in this virtual room at the same time. I'm happily married to Diana, we've been married for over 40 years now. Like most people, there's been light and dark shade throughout the years, but generally speaking, marriage has been good to us, and we're glad to be together, and we're glad that God brought us together, and we're glad that God has forced us through difficult times too. So, that means I come to the subject of marriage feeling very positive, very positive.

But I've been a preacher now for over 40 years, and although I'm happy to preach on the topic, it's never easy, because actually our different filters are impacted by the experiences that we have. I think I've now taken between 600 and 700 weddings throughout my ministry, and on each occasion, I think increasingly through the years, I've become more aware of the other filters that might be on people's eyes. Let me just mention some, because they may relate to you as you come to this topic. In an average wedding I would expect that any of the following might be present.

- There might be someone there who longs to find a perfect partner, and is beginning to wonder if it's too late, and actually comes to it with a certain amount of sadness.
- And in the average wedding, I imagine that there's usually someone there who is attracted to the same sex, and is bracing themselves for a preacher in which another insensitive comment might be said for them.
- I imagine that there might be people in a wedding service who are married but are not in a good place with each other, desperately hoping the preacher won't imply that everything about marriages is fun and easy.
- I think increasingly over recent years, I've been aware of those who struggle to be able to equate their view of themselves with what appears to be a picture of kind-of extreme binary sexual identity, gender identity, the girl being very girly and the boy being very masculine in a wedding service.
- Also in in the average wedding there will be someone who has lost their soulmate, and every wedding still brings them to tears and a painful reminder of all that they have lost.

So, the reason I say this is that none of us come to any discussion about this kind of topic without having our own experiences that affect the filters that are upon our eyes.

But as we come to any topic, the place always for us to start is with the Scriptures and what God has got to say to us. And so, Andrew's asked me to say a little bit about the two opening chapters of Genesis, which I'm very happy to do and I want to pick up three themes that I think are strong in those chapters. Let me just share my screen for a while. I won't do this for the whole time, but there's just a few slides we might look at together.

The first theme I want to mention in Genesis 1 is what scholars call the *imago dei*. The creation narrative is foundation in so many aspects to God's story, and not least in the way that it helps us to understand our humanity. One of the foundational theological phrases in what's called the doctrine of humanity is this phrase

## Genesis 1 and the imago dei

- <sup>26</sup> Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'
- <sup>27</sup> So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (**Genesis 1:26-27**)
- And have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. (**Colossians 3:10**)



*imago dei*. If you put something in Latin, it always sounds more academic and convincing, but it's simply the notion that human beings are made in the image of God. And because we're made in God's image we're able to reflect both His character and His priorities, and the rest of the big story of the Scriptures illustrates all the way through that God keeps trying to call us back to this high calling of being people who know and reflect the character and the grace of God. So, if you look at the prophets that were calling us back to God, if you look at John the Baptist that was inviting us back to God, if you look at Jesus' ministry itself and there in Colossians 3 I've quoted something as well, so God says in the beginning,

... "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

27 So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

So this thing about the image of God says that foundational to our humanity is this capacity to reflect God and partner with Him in the things that He is seeking to do. It makes clear that our identity isn't all about being married. Whether we're married or we're single, the image of God is in us, whoever we are. It's a creation ordinance, the mark of God is upon our lives. Paul was not married, but he had fullness of life, and he understood that the image of God was the high calling he was called back to. Let me just give you a quotation from somebody who knows more about it than me<sup>1</sup>.

The term *imago dei* (the image of God) refers most fundamentally to two things: first, God's own self-actualization through humankind (He is making Himself visible in humanity); and second, God's care for humankind. To say that humans are in the image of God is to recognize the special qualities of human nature which allow God to be made manifest in humans. In other words, for humans to have the conscious recognition of their being in the image of God means that they are the creature through whom God's plans and purposes can be known and actualized; humans, in this way, can be seen as co-creators with God.

What an amazing thing to think! For me, my love of science, it comes from our ability to discover the world that God has made. And I think science is God's way of helping us to celebrate what He's done. Let me give you a couple of quotes from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who said,

After 15 billion years, the universe can finally reflect upon itself through the presence of humanity.

I love this one: he says,

The history of the living world can be summarised as the elaboration of ever-more perfect eyes within a cosmos, in which there's always something more to be seen.

We're made to see God in His creation, and we are made to be part of the actualization of who He is, through our humanity. That to me is foundation to the story of Genesis 1 and Genesis chapter 2, but also we notice that there is a clear statement that God made human beings. It's not that man reflects the character of God, but that male and female are both made in His image. Some would say that it's the participation, the working together of men and women that actually creates the best opportunity for the fullness of the life of God to be expressed.

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1 <https://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/theogloss/imago-body.html>

Now for many years that simple phrase, "male and female He created them" was blatantly self-evident. My first career was in biochemistry and I was at university in the early days really of the study of genetics. And we were taught in those days that there were a very, very small number of people who genetically were hard to define as male or female, but for the majority of us, the vast majority of us, that genetics defines which of those we were. That was expressed in our biological shape and features. It was also expressed in our biochemistry, different balances of the endocrine system, in the chemicals that slop around men, the chemicals that slop around women, affecting a whole range of both physiological and psychological expressions of who we are. And so that was a fairly clear kind of thing. And maleness and femaleness that is found together in the story of God's creativity, it is key because of the task, one of the tasks that is given to humanity. And you'll know that as you go on in that reading it says, as we read this morning,

**27** So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

**28** God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it..."

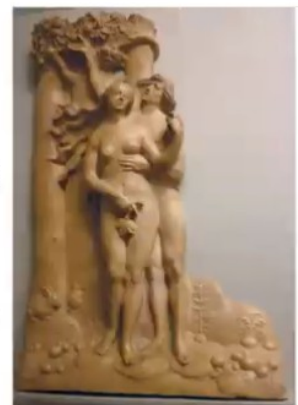
So part of the maleness and femaleness, the complementarity, is coming together for the purpose for which we are created, to multiply and subdue the earth. The complimentary physiology is the way by which new life is formed. Now, however we take the original story of Adam and Eve to be, it is foundational from the story that continues from it. None of us exists, except for what was established there right at the origin of the species, i.e. the complementarity between male and female, donor DNA from a man planted in the womb of a woman: fruitfulness is dependent upon it, and though we have found a few workarounds in the natural process, nothing fundamentally has changed, and of course cloning - I won't get distracted - is a very different kind of process.

So there's the complementarity of gender. And then the following chapter, chapter 2, illustrates more fully how the coming together of two in a committed relationship is the context in which children are not just born but are nurtured. Reassuringly Adam and Eve didn't seem to be much better at it than most of us are today.

Here's another image that I'll offer. This image is the Hering sculpture in the Victoria and Albert Museum which is from 1520. If chapter 1 is written around the story of the earth and its development, and humankind as the pinnacle of God's creativity, reflecting the image of God, chapter 2 is grappling with the glory of relationships that are made possible by humanity.

## Genesis 2

- **18** The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'
- But for Adam no suitable helper was found.
- **22** Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.
- 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called "woman", for she was taken out of man.'
- **24** That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.
- **25** Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.



Something about the image of God in human beings enabled us not to be alone, but to find connectedness and the richness of life in the same way as the Father and the Son and the Spirit live in community, so human beings were designed in order to live in community too. The committed complimentary safe and intimate model of Adam and Eve are foundational to the plan of 'multiply and filling the earth'.

**18** The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

... But for Adam no suitable helper was found. ...

22 Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

... "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman', for she was taken out of man."

24 That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

25 Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

So there's something about intimacy without shame, something about complementarity, something about connectedness.

Now, the picture of a man and a woman united in fruitful intimacy, you might say, "Well, that particular image is from donkeys' years ago, Graham, and the stories of it are difficult to understand - I can't make sense of all that surgery and ribs and all that business. Surely it's not relevant to today, it's just from years and years ago." But of course when we look at the New Testament, we see that in Jesus' words, when He was reflecting the Pharisees on what reasons for divorce might be allowed, Jesus Himself quotes these verses from Genesis chapter 1 and says<sup>2</sup>,

4 He answered, "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder."

And in the early church, as I said before, we think He was probably single, He still quoted that same verse<sup>3</sup>, as in His discussions with the Pharisees too.

31 "For this reason" (He says, quoting Genesis 1) "a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

So there's a consistency throughout the story. And this is reflected in the marriage service. As I said I think I've taken between 600 and 700 weddings over the years - I don't need to be reminded of the words, they're familiar, they're sort of ingrained in my head, I could do it without thinking.

The Bible teaches us (it says in the introduction) that marriage is a gift of God in creation,

A gift - it's not the only gift, there are lots of gifts of God in creation - but it's one of the gifts of God in creation,

and one of the means of his grace, a holy mystery in which man and woman become one flesh.

And it says,

It is God's purpose that, as husband and wife give themselves to each other in love throughout their lives, they shall be united in that love as Christ is united with his church.

So, again, that thing about being made in the image of God, reflecting the character of God, the complementarity of genders and so on, is enshrined in the marriage service.

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2 [RSV]

3 In Ephesians 5:31 [RSV]



And finally, I find this quite moving, these three paragraphs, it talks about the three qualities of actually the marriage relationship, it talks about firstly companionship and connectedness, friendship, good marriages are built on friendship. Secondly, it talks about intimacy. And then it talks about the foundation of family life in which children may be born and nurtured. There's a consistency with the marriage service to the way that the New Testament handles Genesis chapter 1 and 2, and what's put in Genesis 1 and 2, in terms of our ability to reflect the character and the image of God, our calling to be connected to one another, and wonderful forms of that connectedness, the marriage between husband and wife that allows us to be fruitful, to fill the earth, and subdue it.

Marriage is given, that husband and wife may comfort and help each other, living faithfully together in need and in plenty, in sorrow and in joy.

It is given, that with delight and tenderness they may know each other in love, and, through the joy of their intimacy, may strengthen the union of their hearts and lives.

It is given as the foundation of family life in which children may be born and nurtured in accordance with God's will, to his praise and glory.

Now, you might say, "Graham, you've offered a very linear picture of how it is, from Genesis through to the present day." And that's absolutely true. But we're currently engaged in something nationally called 'living in love and faith'. It's a discussion about marriage that's taking place up and down the country, as we try and grapple with the fact that a number of us come to this discussion with a whole lot of other filters and a whole lot of priorities and expectations. There are two big questions that are being considered:



LIVING  
IN LOVE  
& FAITH

- one is, "Can we really say that human beings are just binary in an era when there are ever new definitions of gender that are being defined or self-defined? Is 'binary' a concept that we can no longer quite engage with or buy into?"
- And the second big question that we're facing as a church and society is, "Can we really say that marriage is only a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman, especially now that our legal framework for the nation allows for something else, a committed relationship between two people of the same sex?"

In this discussion about these new strands of thinking, these new questions that have emerged, there are two terms that are often used to describe our responses. They're not perfect terms, terms are never perfect, but

- you will sometimes hear people described or describing themselves as 'orthodox' on the issue of human sexual sexuality, by which a person will mean, "That which I see as the biblical origins I still embrace as being God's normative for human beings."
- And then you will also hear the term 'revisionist': people who might say, "Well, you know what? The Bible talks about this as the kind of normal situation, but that was years ago, and it's time that we revised our understanding of what it means to be in a marriage covenant in the light of what we've been discovering about gender, about attraction, and so on and so forth."

And so that's the kind of parameters within which the discussion is taking place.

So let me just conclude with a couple of challenges to us wherever we sit in that spectrum, and one encouragement that comes from the Archbishop.

- Firstly, for those of us who come to the debate and willingly embrace what you might call a more orthodox perspective on these issues, there are theological challenges and there are pastoral challenges.

- The theological challenge is thinking through what we hold, treasure and believe in the light of new thinking, because it's not impossible for the church sometimes to think that its understanding of how things are ('The world is flat') is based on a theological perspective, which is not a complete perspective. So we need to think through theologically what we believe also in the light of new discoveries and new thinking about these issues.
- And for those of us who hold an orthodox position on this stuff, we need to make sure that we hold it in such a way that the unintended consequence of what we believe is that within our community those who see things in a different way don't feel that they have no access to us as a community or no access particularly to the grace that we are seeking to express of the Good News of Jesus Christ. It's the pastoral challenge if you like.
- And for those of us that hold more of a kind of revisionist view that want to say we want to move from what used to be, we want something completely different,
  - There's a theological challenge there as to what we do with the Biblical texts that seem to speak about the binary nature of humanity, and the connectedness across that as being the sort of expected norm within the Biblical trend.
  - And of course pastorally there is also the thought that's how I express a revisionist view recognising that it isn't the only view that exists within the body of Christ, and God is calling us to still be in community with one another, in the light of different perspectives.

These are not easy things. If they were easy things to consider they would they would have happened in a moment. And two things have happened within the Church of England:

- Two years ago, something called the '6 pastoral principles' were developed, which was an attempt to say, "How do we have good conversations about things we might disagree with?"
- And the second thing is the 'living in love and faith' initiative, which is, "How do we give expression to the wide range of differing theological perspectives that are held and enable ourselves to have the best conversation about marriage going into the future?"

The phrase that I picked up from Justin Welby was that he asked that we might have the conversation with the same grace and love that has been extended to us in Christ.

So there's our starting position, there'll be three or four more talks that come through this series, and I ask you to pray for Andrew, and pray for all Christian leaders, as they seek to navigate their way through this important topic.

Let's pray together, shall we?

Father, we recognise that these pastoral issues that we come to, and we recognise, Father, that our own experiences impact the way that we think, and often cause us to feel the pain that comes from all sorts of things in our lives, where we wish that things might be different.

So we pray, Father, that as You seem to establish marriage as a good thing, there right at the beginning of time, that was underlined by Jesus, though not embraced by Him, we pray that You would help us to have this conversation in a way that leads us ever closer to Your heart and Your mind, that we may best reflect the image of God in the way that we live and the things that we say, in Jesus' name. Amen.

[Andrew:] Amen.

## ***Prayerful Reflection***

Thank you, Graham, thank you ever so much for that. Let's just continue briefly in a moment of prayer.

Holy Spirit, would you give us a moment of quiet now, so that we can be still and we can reflect on what we've heard. Let's just have a minute of quiet.

Father in the quiet, we receive from You again the text and the themes that have been presented to us again, in Genesis and reaffirmed by Jesus and Paul. We thank You Lord, that You have made us in Your image. We thank You, Lord, for the complementarity that You have made in male and female. We thank You, Lord, for the richness of relationship and community that can be found in marriage, we thank You for these things.

We thank You Lord, that even though it isn't the only gift, it is a gift from You, and we celebrate it as a gift. And Father, as we explore this subject, we remember that the picture of marriage given is a picture of Christ and the church. Lord, as we work our way through the various complicated nuances of conversation that are happening at this time, strengthen us in our understanding and give us hearts that can relate well one to another, as we explore these things. In Jesus' name. Amen.

[Graham:] Amen.

Okay, I'm going to hand over now to Karen and Marcus who will lead us in our prayers. Thank you, Graham.

[Graham:] Thanks.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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