

## Agenda for the Church

A few days ago the UK Supreme Court declared the present restriction of civil partnership to same-sex couples to be incompatible with human rights. A young couple, who wish to be faithful to one another, have sought permission to use civil partnership as a way of doing so, formally and legally, but without the patriarchal connotations of religious marriage. They have always had open to them the option of a marriage, either civil or religious, but they have rejected that option. In this they are like many others who have chosen simply to live together informally.

It seems likely that this proposed change in the law might result in considerable further social change in the status and esteem of marriage (as Christians understand it). And of course the question of human sexuality has been almost a fixture on Agendas of the councils of the churches for a very long time. If religious marriage is simply 'the way Christians do it' will there be a drive for the churches to revert to a previous pattern, demanding more (whatever that might mean) in terms of the pre-conditions expected of a couple who seek marriage? If this were to happen, would there also be push-back against same-sex marriages and other forms of relationship.

In the light of this development (among others) I wonder whether it might be time to reappraise the Christian understanding of marriage. It is claimed that the marriage covenant reflects the patriarchal, asymmetric nature of a relationship with God. Some Christians hold strongly the view that this expresses perfectly their understanding of marriage, based on love and trust. These assumptions are now open to serious challenge. I am not suggesting that it is time simply to throw away an outdated concept – that would be, in my view, to trivialise the whole matter.

Rather, I want to raise this question. Are we using an image of marriage to help us understand the divine/human relationship? Or is it the other way round – is it that we are using the notion of a 'perfect marriage' to help us understand our human relationship to God? Does the traditional and long-cherished notion of divine covenant help us to grasp the emerging realities of human intimacies, with their tangled web of fidelities and infidelities, sullen silences and angry outbursts, devotions and betrayals; or do these sometimes-messy human realities offer us a perspective on something we cannot 'see' by other means: our relationship with God? In short, are using each to illuminate the other. How can that work? These images were created many centuries ago in entirely different settings.

Personally, I believe that over many centuries we have tangled the threads of this double-ended metaphor far beyond the point when it has ceased to be useful. Does it help us to understand the meaning of marriage? Does it help us to understand (or express) the Covenant with God which Methodists renew every year? In saying this, of course, I may be wrong: the cries of the disappearing baby may indeed be heard through the sound of gurgling bathwater. But I wonder whether in our ancient certitudes we may have failed to hear the pulse of God's love.

But there are immense issues to be pondered here. It could fairly be said that much of Christian theology has been shaped by the ways in which that 'perfect human marriage' has been used as a metaphor for our relationship with God. As we explore the issues surrounding human relationships, we need to be aware that we are touching some of the core foundations of our faith. We need, therefore, to proceed with a degree of cautious reverent respect.

Of course there will be many who respond with instinctive horror to any kind of re-interpretation of these notions. After all, they have served us for many centuries; they have provided us with identity and coherence in our faith and in our living; we should not lightly discard them. Are we not, however, at liberty to explore them in the light of the vast changes of the past two millennia? This is why I favour a reasoned conversation rather than the activities of thought police.

