

What it means to be human: in partnership

Genesis 2:4-25

Do you know who this is? Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States! Although, it was never a sure bet that he would ever be elected as President.

Before he was elected in 1861, Lincoln had to secure the nomination to be the republican candidate. We see this happening right now in American politics: the election for president is over a year away, but right now candidates are battling to be the one representing their party. Lincoln had to go through the same thing and at one stage he was running fourth. He didn't have a very impressive resume; he had been a congressman but had failed to get elected to the senate, and there were other men who were far more qualified than him. Lincoln knew that, and the other candidates knew it as well. But someone forgot to tell the republican party! When the time came to select a candidate, Lincoln won the vote, and, of course, he went on to win the presidency.

This is when he did a surprising thing. As president he needed to select a cabinet, and so whom did he appoint? He appointed his rivals from the nomination race. These were men who had looked down upon Lincoln, but he didn't care, he wanted the best men for his team and so he appointed people who had greater skills!

As you can imagine, it wasn't smooth sailing. Within one month, the secretary of state, William Seward, he started to publically undermine the president, but Lincoln won him over. So much so that Seward would later write that Lincoln was the "best and wisest man he had ever known". Lincoln's attorney general, Edward Bates, he never got over the fact that he lost the candidacy to Lincoln and so he offered his resignation numerous times, but time and time again Lincoln refused it! When Lincoln finally agreed he simply moved Bates and made him chief justice of the Supreme Court.

This story is documented in a book called *A Team of Rivals* written by Doris Kearns Goodwin, and it demonstrates why Lincoln is rated the best ever US president. His choice of cabinet members speaks a lot about his own character; he was worried less about his own ego than about getting the job done. And it's also clear that for Lincoln, getting the job done meant having the right team.

Here at Waitara Anglican we are 2 weeks into our series looking at Genesis 1-11, and as we read these chapters we're asking ourselves the question "What does it mean to be human"? Today's answer is that being human means being part of a team; a team with a purpose, a team that has a job to get done. In particular Genesis 2 helps us to understand a very basic kind of team, the team of a man and woman who are together in marriage. As we'll see, this isn't the only team that humans can find themselves on, but our society is reviewing marriage in a pretty major way at the moment, so it's a good thing for us to think about what the Bible says about it.

Also Hebrews 13:4 says that marriage should be honored by all, which means that everyone has a responsibility to think carefully about it.

So I invite you to have your Bibles open at Genesis 2, and to place marriage within a bit of context we'll talk first about some other relationships that we find themselves in. Obviously the primary relationship is the one we have with our creator. Again, as we heard last week in Ch 1, there is a God who is responsible for our existence.

Chapter 2:7 Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. The origins of all life begin with God! And God demonstrates that he has a particular love for the human being he created. The special garden that we read about seems to be created for Adam. Verse 8: Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed.
⁹ The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. The diversity and beauty of nature is something created for us!

God's concern for Adam is also shown in the creation of a partner in v18. When I was working as a youth worker I discovered that parents were often concerned about their offspring, particularly if the children had trouble making friends they would send their young ones to youth group to find the social network that was missing – God's concern is the same. And like a parent type figure, God also sets a boundary: Verse 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die. We'll hear more about that tree next week.

Looking elsewhere in these opening chapters we see that humans also have a relationship with the animals, although it's a very different relationship to the one we have with God. Whereas God is very much the dominant partner in his interactions with us, we are the dominant partners when it comes to the animal kingdom. So when it comes to understanding the relationships that we humans find ourselves in, there seems to be a hierarchy: God first, then humanity, then the creatures of land and sea.

The question to ask now is where the marriage relationship fits into all this. Well, let's see how this marriage relationship came about. From verse 18 we have a remarkable scene where God recognizes Adam's need of a partner, and so he marshals the animals and presents them to Adam. Adam is given the freedom to name the animals as he likes, (a remarkable delegation of responsibility from God to Adam, by the way), but we read at the end of verse 20 for Adam no suitable helper was found.

God's next action is to take one of Adam's ribs and to mold a new creation! Presenting this new creation to Adam, God is met with a different reaction! From verse 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. ²³ The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."

Each time you read this story you pick up different details. What's struck me this time is how Adam sees something of himself in Eve: This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This relationship is going to be very different to the others. Whereas Adam finds himself under God and over the animals, with Eve it's more like he's looking into a mirror; this is a pairing of equals.

Over the last 18 months or so our society has become increasingly aware of a great disease that exists within our culture. Domestic violence is in our news in a new way, and on one level it's a good thing that we are learning more about what is going on in some households, although the stories themselves are horrendous.

Domestic (or family) violence is not just physical but it can be emotional and financial, it can affect men and women, adults and children, even grandparents, although statistically it's the wives and kids who are bearing the brunt. At its center seems to be a unhealthy desire for one partner to control the other, and that's a horrible distortion of marriage as it's presented in Genesis 2. One of the things that makes the marriage relationship unique is the equality that's involved. Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh. In the New Testament Paul picks up on this in Ephesians 5 when he commands husbands to love their wives as their own bodies he says. He who loves his wife loves himself.

So I think this aspect of marriage is one we need to remember now more than ever because our wider society seems to have left this behind. Spouses are not there to be dominated over, rather God's design is for you to treat them as an equal.

Having said that, it would also be a mistake to say that men and women are exactly the same. Men and women are equal in dignity but there is a complementary nature to our genders as well. Genesis 1 speaks of two types of human, together reflecting something of God's image but distinguishable by their different genders: male and female. Here in Genesis 2 we have *man* and *woman* in verse 23, *fathers* and *mothers* are mentioned in 24. There is also a difference in the way Adam and Eve are created. Both are formed out of the created order, but not in the same way: Adam out of the dust, Eve out of Adam's side.

Even when we move outside the Bible we see from basic observations that there are important differences, Not only in terms of our physical appearance and biological functions but also in the different ways we process information. Men and women are different, and it seems that God intends for that diversity to play a part within marriage.

This leads us right into another hot issue, doesn't it? On one hand our society agrees with us when we say that domestic violence is a distortion of marriage as God intended it, on the other hand there is much disagreement over same-sex marriage. But if we're going to follow the Bible consistently then we'll have to conclude that gay marriage is also outside of God's design.

Now, I'm in no way saying that the two distortions are exactly the same. We ought to recognize that the abuse of one person by another is a very different scenario to one where two people desire marriage, and our society recognizes as much. But, it is true that both distortions grieve God very much.

Some people might say that culture has moved on, but our culture has never been the marker of what's acceptable in God's sight. The marker is what we have written in God's word. And in any case, the pattern of males and females in marriage is set up from the very beginning of the Bible's story; it would seem that what we have written here is meant to be understood as a universal ideal, not one that is simply rooted in any one particular culture.

Controversial stuff that we are talking about today, but I really don't want us to be distracted from the *next* point because it's just as important even though it might be more subtle. Genesis 2 also teaches us that marriage is a partnership with a purpose!

What role does Adam have in the garden? His job is to work it and take care of it (v15). And we spoke about this last week, didn't we? Our task as humans is to get working and bring order to the world, but it's a big job! God recognizes this, and creates Eve as a helper.

This how we're to understand God's concern for Adam's loneliness. When God says "it's not good for man to be alone", he doesn't mean "Poor Adam has no one to watch TV with while he eats bad takeaway." Context suggests he means "Poor Adam needs some help doing his job." Marriage has a very practical aim: it's a tool to help us be productive in the world. It's the place where children are raised and trained to take over from us. And — this was perhaps more obvious in generations gone by — marriage creates households that generate income and provide shelter for others.

Marriage is not about self-fulfillment. I think this is where our society gets it wrong again. We think that happiness will come with the wedding, or with the grandchildren that our children's marriages will produce. Marriages can be great sources of joy, but that's not the ultimate aim. Even the intimacy and companionship of marriage is not an end in itself. Jas and I went away for 24 hours over this last Friday and Saturday. People might say "how romantic." Well, yes, it was, but on one level what we actually were doing was having a team bonding exercise that will help us achieve the bigger aim – being a team that works together to do God's work.

If this sounds all a little bit clinical, like I'm a little bit down on marriage, well, I do see a need to redress an imbalance within our churches. Marriage is not for everyone, and I think we do our Christian communities a disservice when we overplay its value and importance. And I think a more sober view might just save some from diving into something they ought to steer clear of.

Because as we see in this next point, the Bible takes marriage very seriously; it's not

something to be rushed into. Chapter 2 v 24 is a great summary of marriage: That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. In our second reading from Mark 10 we heard Jesus pick up on this verse; he quotes v24 to emphasize that the ideal marriage is a lasting partnership. In Jesus day men were divorcing their wives for the most trivial of reasons, often driven by lust, and Jesus is reminding them of God's standards, standards of faithfulness and commitment, standards which echo God's own attitude towards us, an attitude of love and loyalty.

Are there any circumstances where a couple might be able to get a divorce? Yes, there are some, divided into roughly three categories the three "As" as I call them: Adultery, Abandonment, Abuse. I think the Bible creates provision for divorce under those circumstances, but failing that, then the expectation is "until death do we part". When people heard Jesus giving this teaching some of them said "Woah, it's better to not get married!" And Jesus said, "Yep, not everyone can accept this!" Sometimes it's better to not walk down the aisle.

I think it's healthy to realize that there is a greater partnership that each and everyone of us is called to be a part of. Paul says in Ephesians that marriage between men and women is really an echo of the relationships created by Christ. Like a husband and wife are bound to each other so too are we bound to Christ by his death and resurrection, a death and resurrection which, by the way, makes forgiveness possible for all those who've failed to live up to the expectations of Genesis 2.

And as we are bound to Christ we are also bound to our brothers and sisters in the church. As divorce can all too easily demonstrate, marriage can be fleeting, but it's the relationships in the church that are the ones that last the distance. When widows are in distress, where does the Bible suggest they turn? To the people of God, that's the greater team that all believers are a part of.

A couple of centuries before Abraham Lincoln, the English poet John Donne wrote these words, *No man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.* In other words, no one person exists on their own, we're all connected in some way. This is what marriage is about, but even more than that, it's what the Christian life is about: connected to Christ, connected to each other.

Let me lead us in prayer.