

Ephesians 5:21-33

n. 1616

‘Be filled with the Spirit ... subject to one another out of reverence for Christ’ (Ephesians 5:21).

- This cut across the traditional ‘family values’ of Paul’s society

‘Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands’ (5:22-24).

- Though Paul assumes the traditional structure in which authority is vested in the husband, his accent is on how the wife is to be subject, and how the husband is to exercise his authority as head of the household.
- Though Paul is not suggesting a change in the authority structure of a Christian family, he is introducing a reference to Christ - a revolutionary principle which must bring changes to the traditional structure.

1

‘Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish’ (Ephesians 5:25-27).

- Imagery taken from ritual preparation of a bride for the nuptials, and from Baptism
- Also draws on OT imagery of God as the Bridegroom and Israel as the bride.
- Paul is using the imagery of marriage to describe the loving care that Christ has for his Church
- He also explores the meaning that this intimacy between Christ and the Church has for our understanding of the consecrated love of husband and wife.

2

‘In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (5:28-31).

- Paul quotes Genesis 2:24. His words are to be read in the light of the Genesis narrative. Incidentally, we must not forget that in that narrative male dominion is the result not of God’s intention but of sin (Genesis 3:16).

‘This is a great mystery [Latin ‘sacramentum’], and I am applying it to Christ and the church’ (Ephesians 5:32).

- Marriage is a ‘sacrament’ of God’s design to draw everyone into a consecrated love-communion in the Body of Christ (the Church). Paul is presenting the communion in love of husband and wife ‘in Christ’ as a special witness to the mystery of divine communion that exists between Christ and the community that lives by Christ’s Spirit.

3

‘Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should reverence [Greek: phobeō] her husband’ (Ephesians 5:33).

- Paul used the same word [phobeō] at the beginning of this passage when he spoke of Christians being ‘subject to one another out of reverence for Christ [en phobō christou]’ (Ephesians 5:21).
- The relationship between husband and wife is to be based on a mutual sense of the sacred. The love that binds them together is God’s love.
- Their love will be true only to the extent that it comes from prayer and issues in prayer, for they are to each other sacraments of this love, and the love that conceives life is a sharing in God’s creative action.

4

Paul's basic insight still applies: marriage has been transformed by the fact that the union it expresses has reached its fulfilment in Christ.

n.1639 'Authentic married love is caught up into divine love.'

Marriage is now a sacrament of this communion between Christ and the Church, and so all the relationships that exist between a husband and wife are to be transformed, enlightened and enlivened by the presence of Christ binding wife and husband together in love.

When a husband loves his wife, Christ loves her. When a wife loves her husband, Christ loves him. When a husband obeys ('listens attentively to') his wife, he is obeying Christ; and when a wife obeys her husband, she is obeying Christ. When they thank each other, correct each other, or forgive each other, they are to do so 'in Christ'. When they are 'subject to one another'(5:21) and discern in love the best way to act together in their married life, using all the spiritual means available to make their discernment, they are doing so, not because of an assumption that the husband commands and the wife obeys, but 'in Christ', inspired by his love and guided by his Spirit.

5

This is of special importance for any children they may have. It is their mutual, sacramental love which will provide the sacred garden in which the children are to be nurtured. It will be the children's basic experience of fidelity and of the creative self-giving of God. It is important for the Church community. It is important for the Church's mission to the world.

Their consecrated love is the existential foundation for a life of generativity and creativity: in their own relationship; in the overflowing of this love in the building of a family and a home; and in their growing ability to contribute to the community in building an environment of love.

Commitment to the sacrament of marriage is a commitment to love. It is a commitment to love as Jesus loves, with the communion of love which he has with the Father. The commitment of the couple to each other is sustained by the prior commitment of God to them. The risen Christ commits himself to pour out the Spirit of his love on the couple, so that they will not only experience joy, but that 'your joy may be complete'(John 16:24).

6

Kahlil Gibran

You were born together, and together you shall be for ever more.  
You shall be together when the white wings of death scatter your days.  
Yes, you shall be together in the silent memory of God.  
But let there be spaces in your togetherness,  
and let the winds of the heavens dance between you.  
Love one another, but make not a bond of love:  
let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.  
Fill each other's cup, but drink not from one cup.  
Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf.  
Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone,  
even as the strings of a lute are alone  
though they quiver with the same music.  
Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping,  
for only the hand of Life can contain your hearts.  
And stand together yet not too near together:  
for the pillars of the temple stand apart,  
and the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.

7