

Genesis 2:18-25 & 1 Corinthians 7:1-6 Marriage – why sex?

A few years ago I saw an advertisement for a sleek black car – something like this perhaps (picture) – and the slogan read 'Safer sex'.

Has sex got anything to do with a sleek black car – or a motorbike or lawnmower, for that matter? The question is daft, of course, but if we can now use sex to sell cars it does raise the question, what is sex really for? If it is not for selling cars, what is it for? What is the meaning of sex? Why should we have sex? What is the Christian view of sex?

Well, if you're a child growing up in a Christian family you will know this: that sex is a good gift of God, it is to be enjoyed in marriage and it is not to be used at all outside marriage. You wait.

OK, that's all true – and we'll look at the 'Why wait for marriage?' question in a couple of weeks' time – but it doesn't take us very far in answering the 'why?' question. For married people, then, what is sex for?

And to answer that we need to go back to the one who invented it; we need to go back to Genesis and ask the creator.

We've been looking at creation in the morning services, and we have discovered these four important truths about human beings – this concerns every one of you here this evening:

One: we are created beings. Two: we are created in God's image. Three: we are created male and female. Four: we have been given a task, to care for and rule the earth.

Putting all that together, we have been given an awesome privilege and an awesome responsibility. We have the awesome privilege of being in relationship with God and accountable to him, and we have the enormous responsibility and task of caring for the creation. We have that task because we are made in God's image and we carry out that task as male and female. And here's the important point: this is where sex fits in to the picture: it is given to us to help us fulfil the task God has given us. In the words of the best book on marriage I have read, it is sex in the service of God.

To break this down and ask how does sex in marriage help us to serve God in the task he has given us, I'm going to look at it under three aspects, following the three reasons for marriage which are laid out in the Book of Common Prayer: the gift of children, the development of an intimate relationship, and the maintenance of public order.

The gift of children

Some years ago one of the boys in our previous church came home from a sex education lesson at school and in the discussion which followed told his parents that he thought that 16 was about the right age at which to start having sex. "OK," replied his mother, "so you're telling me that when you reach the age of 16 you will be mature enough to be a father." Her son looked at her, astonished. "No, I'm not talking about being a father, I'm talking about having sex."

Hang on a moment . . . might there not be a connection between having sex and having children?

We've reached a stage where contraception is so widely available and reliable – though not as reliable as many people assume – that we have almost managed to separate sex from procreation. So for more and more people in western countries, children have become either an unwanted nuisance or a lifestyle choice. In France, for example, the birthrate among the ethnic French population is so low that women are being paid hundreds of pounds a month if they have a third child. At the same time, every year the number of unwanted babies being disposed of before birth is increasing. And now, to add to the confusion, lesbian couples can have children by IVF and our government has decided that such a child no longer needs a father.

So: sex – children – mothers – fathers – where is the connection now? They've been blown apart.

But the Bible, from beginning to end, is totally positive about children and motherhood and fatherhood.

Genesis 1:28:

"Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule . . ."

Our task is to fill the earth and rule it and care for it. And one of the ways we are to do this is by having children. Parenthood is good. That is one of the reasons why the Bible is so positive about sex. It is good.

Incidentally, it is also one of the reasons why the Bible is so negative about divorce. Many of you will be familiar with God's condemnation of the Israelites, in the book of Malachi, for so easily divorcing their wives. "I hate divorce", he says. And listen to one of the reasons he gives:

Has not the LORD made them one? And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. (Malachi 2:15)

He was seeking godly offspring. That is one reason why the one-flesh relationship of sex and marriage matters so much to God: he wants us to produce children, godly offspring, a new godly generation who will continue the task of caring for the earth.

Why have sex? To produce children. Also, secondly, to build an intimate relationship.

Intimate companionship

The last verse of Genesis chapter 2 speaks volumes:

The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Here is the simple and unembarrassed joy of a completely open and intimate relationship such as can only exist between a man and a woman in marriage. They are, God says, one flesh.

But why? Why is this close intimate relationship necessary? Why does it have to be a woman, not another man? Why does it need sex? Why was it only Eve who would do for Adam?

Let me say three things about this marriage relationship.

First, it was not given primarily to deal with Adam's loneliness.

This might come as a surprise to us because we live in a needs-dominated, needs-obsessed, culture. What matters above all is that my needs are met.

The tendency for us is to assume that when God says, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper," the problem is that Adam is lonely and needs a companion.

The text doesn't say that. And the rest of the Bible doesn't say that. The Bible's answer to loneliness is family. In addition, the Bible models a number of deep and close same-sex friendships. We as church-family should heed these things. We have a wonderful God-given opportunity to help assuage some of the loneliness of modern life, especially for the unmarried. Marriage is a wonderful God-given remedy for loneliness, but that wasn't its prime purpose nor is it the only remedy.

Second, having said that, sex in marriage does build a close intimate relationship, and it is meant to. Let's remind ourselves of what Paul taught the Corinthians:

Each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other . . . (1 Corinthians 7:2-5)

It's pretty clear. Sex in marriage is very important. And it's mutual: husbands, you owe it to your wives; wives, you owe it to your husbands. God wants to see close, intimate, sexually-active relationships within marriage. He sees it as a good thing.

Why?

This brings us to the third thing I want to say, and the real purpose of an intimate marriage relationship, which is that it is needed because of the task. Once again, it is the overriding task of ruling creation which is the key. When a marriage relationship is intimate and deep we will be better equipped to serve God and God's world.

A number of times I have come across marriages which have broken up when the children leave home, even though the couple may have been married for thirty years or so. I wonder whether that is, in part, because the marriage has lost its task. No children to care for: why stay together?

Marriage needs a task. It is there for a purpose. Marriage and sex are given to help us serve God better – sex in the service of God. Which means that it is vital that our marriages are outward-looking and other-people-serving.

C S Lewis used to point to the difference between lovers who sit facing one another looking in, and those who sit side by side looking out. If our marriage is there purely for one another it is not a big step for it to be there – and for sex to be there – just for me. It is not a big step for 'I love you' to become 'I love me and I want you'.

We need to look outwards. Human beings are made in the image of God so that, as his image-bearers, we might serve his world. We do that as male and female. So the purpose of sex and marriage is that we might serve God by serving his world.

Now as someone who is a true Englishman – whose home is his castle and who loves to be safely and privately ensconced at home – I need to listen to my own preaching. God has given us who are married a wonderful opportunity to serve others by welcoming them into the family circle. Strong marriages can be a great boon to others. I can remember that when I was a student, away from home,

there was nothing more heartwarming than to be invited to a family home for Sunday lunch or for an evening. Husbands and wives, of course we need that time to sit alone facing each other, but we must also sit side by side facing outwards to others.

Adam needs a woman not primarily because he is lonely, but because the task is too big. He needs a woman – not just a person – partly to produce godly offspring, but also because the powerful and unique male-female sexual bond creates a relationship which can bring great blessing to others. It is, I repeat, sex in the service of God.

Now, were it not for Genesis chapter 3, we could stop there. But, tragically, chapter 3 does follow chapter 2, and unembarrassed nakedness gives way to shameful cover-up as the result of rebellion. And as we saw here this morning, at every level the delightful order of the creation is dissolved into miserable chaos.

So there is a third reason for sex within marriage, which is the maintenance of public order.

The maintenance of public order

What has sex got to do with maintaining the peace?

Sin spoils everything. This does not mean that nothing is good any more. It means that nothing is as good as it should be. Whether it is work, or friendship, or marriage, or family life, or the state of society, or our relationship with God – nothing is perfect any more. Everything is damaged.

Including sex. Sex in Eden was perfect. It is no longer so.

And we need to be realistic about this. Every one of us is a sexual sinner. Boys try to take advantage of girls. Girls provoke boys. Men scan the internet. Women flirt. People have affairs and lie about them. Unwanted babies are born. I'm generalising massively, of course, but my point is that we are all caught up in this and none is innocent.

And one of the big purposes of marriage is to make sex safe by keeping it within God's boundaries. Safe sex is not about condoms and certainly not about sleek black cars. Safe sex is sex in marriage.

It is a matter of historical fact that societies with carefully regulated sexual behaviour tend to flourish, while sexual disorder accompanies cultural decline. From the ancient world, we know that the decline of the Roman Empire was accompanied by a growing despising of marriage and motherhood and a growing acceptance of all sorts of sexually disordered behaviour. Nearer our own time, the Soviet Union did all it could to undermine family and marriage, from 1917 onwards, and nearly a century on, in 2004, the fruit of this experiment was a record of 1.5 million live births but 1.6 million registered abortions. And in our own country, after nearly half a century of deliberate rejection of biblical morality, we have ever-increasing numbers of teenage pregnancies, fatherless children, sexually-transmitted diseases, and families spiralling out of control.

A couple of months ago a speech by a family judge, Mr Justice Coleridge, made the headlines, in which he said this:

"In many areas of our country family life is, quite frankly, in meltdown or completely unrecognisable; family life in the old sense no longer exists. I suggest that the general collapse of ordinary family life in this country is on a scale, depth and breadth which few of us could have imagined even a decade ago."

I think we all know this. The point I want to make today is simply this: God has given us guidelines which are good for us: good for individuals, good for families, good for society. The world thinks that the Bible is anti-sex and God is the great spoilsport. It's actually the other way round completely. It's the devil who hates sex and he has done a brilliant job of ruining it for millions, and ruining their lives at the same time. Christians are not killjoys. On the contrary, we long to see people happy and fulfilled as they find their meaning in God and in the wonderful ways he has prepared for them.

Nearly twenty years ago, when I was not long ordained, a member of our church was talking with me about a man who was frequently unfaithful to his wife and made her life a misery. "The trouble is," she said to me, "that Dave uses sex in the way that you or I might use a cigarette." And it struck me at the time how important it is to answer the question, what is sex for? Why have sex? How should we use it?

For having children: yes. For building a close and intimate husband-wife relationship: yes. For making society a better place: yes. But more than that, and holding these three good things together, sex helps men and women to fulfil the purposes of God and serve him better in the world in which he has put us. Let's try to see sex in its proper place: sex in the service of God.