

## Psalm 45

If there was a first century near eastern version of Disneyfied animation, then here it is in the form of psalm 45. We can play with the text, and dress it up as something else. But the fact is, this is a poem for a wedding day between a King and a princess! It probably wasn't the only wedding that a king would have – and I would like to have heard what some of his other wives would think of this psalm. Although it probably was the only wedding his bride would have!

Weddings are a bit of touchy subject for me. Given that I have been on the receiving end of a divorce with all the nastiness that entails. And yet, this week, I attended and spoke at the wedding of my little sister. It was fascinating! A secular ceremony! Run at a hotel. No religious input was allowed. No address from a religious figure was to be tolerated. All that was allowed, was a reading selected from a list. And the couple choose the reading that they feel has the fewest cheesy clichés! But this reading constituted the moral message of the ceremony. I was handed the reading two minutes before the service began! It felt almost like being at Bloomsbury. I looked at this reading – and despaired.

After the service, everyone came up to me to tell me what a wonderful message this was! And after explaining to over a dozen people, not only that I did not write it, but fundamentally disagreed with it – I was losing the will to live. It was a reading full of nice little explanations about what makes a good marriage. And at first, I couldn't work out just what it was that I found so offensive about this thing! Surely, it was just full of nice little sugary clichés about marriage.

And I think I stumbled over one phrase, that for me showed how the notion of marriage had been turned into something entirely different! It was this: “Marriage is never taking the other person for granted!...” Never taking the other person for granted. Okay – I guess we can see how in some senses, we should not take people for granted. And I hope you don't think that what I'm about to do is to split hairs! But let's think a little bit about taking someone for granted.

Of course, on the surface of it, it is important to express our appreciation of people – and if that never happens, then yes there is something wrong! But the word that we use for granted and for grant, is a gift! There is no need for pay back. A grant. In fact, grant is an old English word which means to insure, or to guarantee! And the old English word is derived from an even older French word which means the same – to insure, to guarantee. And the old French word is derived from the Latin word – credens, to believe, to trust! Literally speaking, to take someone for granted, is to trust them, to place your faith in them as utterly trustworthy!

Forgive me if you think this is just a clever word game! It is going somewhere! To take someone for granted, is to live as though they are utterly trustworthy – you are putting all your eggs in the fragile basket of another human being's trustworthiness. If marriage is a gift – if marriage is about making promises of trust and faith – then you jolly well should be able to take the other person for granted. Just as they should be able to take you for granted.

What kind of a relationship is it, when the other person constantly has to prove themselves worthy of your trust? What kind of relationship is it, when you constantly expect the other person to jump through hoops of proving themselves to you? What kind of relationship is it

when you are always on edge because you are always having to prove yourself? What kind of relationship is it when you are never able to take the other person for granted? It is precisely the kind of relationship that this secular service celebrated: namely, one that is based upon a refusal of trust.

If your relationship is based upon a refusal of trust, a refusal to see marriage as a mutual gift, then the marriage is no longer a covenant. It is a contract! And marriage as a contract is a very different game to the idea of marriage as a covenant!

I think this is one reason why I feel uneasy about the notion of ministers having contracts with churches! Because a contract serves one purpose! A contract is to protect you from people you cannot trust. Not necessarily people who are untrustworthy – but people who you are not absolutely sure whether you can trust. A contract is to protect you from people you cannot trust. Now, at some levels – there are different forms of business relations that rightly rely on contracts.

But what does it say about our human nature if the most intimate of all relationships still has to be based upon the idea of a contract? Still based on the idea that in order to be worthy of our love – the other person must jump through hoop after hoop.

This, it seems to me, is the reason why marriage services are something solemn, and scary – and perhaps so carefully worded in their traditional Anglican and Catholic forms. They may seem harsh, and they may seem to lack the beauty of more contemporary fluffy language. “In sickness and in health, for richer for poorer, for better or worse”. This is not the language of a contract! It is the language of a covenant.

It’s interesting, one of my most well used books is the Inter Varsity Press Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels. And when you look up what Jesus has to say on Marriage – it gives you two words! See divorce! I have spent too much time around family law solicitors. Too much time in divorce courts. And time after time after time, chatting to people involved in all aspects of the nasty business of divorce, you hear people talking about marriage as though it were a contract. And even using the language of the marriage contract!

But marriage is not a contract, it is a covenant. It gets us to the heart of how human relationships work well. Not to say that you have to be married to be fully human. But it is an explicit, concrete example of covenant relationship – focussed upon two people but implicating the entire community.

And yes, there are times when the covenant is dishonoured! You read about this in Hosea – whose own wife was unfaithful. And God says – look, I have this marriage covenant with Israel – and Israel has been like an unfaithful wife. And she has dishonoured me time after time after time. And you can almost hear God’s heart breaking when you read these chapters. On the one hand he is threatening to turn his back upon unfaithful Israel. But on the other, he cannot do it! He cannot bring himself to do it! How can I give you up – he says, How can I turn my back on you! If God’s relationship with his people were merely a contract – then yes, he could walk away from the relationship because it has been broken by the other party.

But this is a covenant relationship – and it has an awful cost at times. And this relationship is one that causes the deepest grief in God himself. This is a relationship that leads to suffering

– the suffering of the Son of God. This is a covenant relationship that leads to the cross! Your not likely to find that sentiment expressed in a secular marriage service.

Of course, I don't want to paint the picture of a relationship that is based upon doom and gloom and duty and being stuck. That is not the story of how God deals with His people, it is not the story of a good marriage and it is not the story of any healthy human relationship. This was articulated with great eloquence by Sylvester Stalone's character, Rocky – in that profoundly moving Hollywood Blockbuster, Rocky III.

Rocky's best friend is a bit of a waster – complaining that the successful boxer, Rocky, ought to have helped him out – because friends owe. And Rocky says “nobody owes nobody nothing”. And his friend says “Friends don't owe! They do because they want to do!” I never used to agree with that – I thought it was 1980s individualism. But I've grown to appreciate the profundity of Rocky! And I think it's right – it's closer to the Biblical ideal that we read about in this psalm! “Friends don't owe – they do because they want to do!”

How awful would it be if everything good and beautiful and encouraging that was ever done for you, was done out of duty? What kind of a miserable person would that make you? When I refuse to give my children a drink until they say thank you, how valuable is that thank you when it is offered grudgingly. But when my kids just leave me a random note on my pillow, with a rubbish picture of a football match, with badly spelt thank you's scribbled in biro on an old tesco receipt – isn't that invaluable! Friends don't owe – they do because they want to do!

The way that Christians relate with one another and with God, is not simply another expression of protecting ourselves from the dangers of mistrust! We invest our trust in another person, and there is a readiness to suffer that comes with that – quite literally, a compassion! I was delighted to hear that word used well by a Scottish minister this week.

The Lockerbie bomber, released prematurely on Compassionate Grounds. Now, I realise that this is a complex case, and not surprisingly – Scotland's decision has not been universally welcomed. And as a result, not surprisingly, accusations of fowl play have been batted around. But when the director of the FBI attacked the Scottish minister with a moralising condemnation (which struck me as a bit rich coming from a nation that runs Guantanamo Bay) but the Fbi director attacks the Scottish decision – the response was beautiful. Compassionate Release is not part of the American Justice System. It is part of the Scottish justice system.

Most of the hype surrounding this case, and forming people's judgement on it, seems to me – as a non-lawyer – to be based on the assumption that there is only one form of justice, retributive: exacting revenge. You took, and so you pay! But is that contractual, transactional way expectation really a good way of being human?

To be human is to be compassionate, to suffer with another. And that is the promise we make in concrete form, when we get baptised, when we become a church member, when we get married. And it is that level of utter mutual commitment, that can lead to a beautiful experience of what it is to be human – just as it can lead to utter darkness and suffering! And yet, even there – even in that darkest place, the story is not ended.

Thank God that he does not deal with us in contractual ways – but in covenantal ways. Thank God that our Holy Scripture is not comprised of an old contract and a new contract, but on an

old covenant and a new covenant. Thank God that we can take him for granted – and thank God that he trusts us enough to take us for granted. Thank God that he does not expect us to jump through hoops before he blesses us, that he does not turn our back on us when we let him down. Thank God, that the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ is a God of compassion. A God who calls us to follow his Son to the cross. But a God who ensures that the cross is not the end of the story!

Lack of grace!