

REFLECTIONS ON “HOLY MATRIMONY” FOR LAMBETH 2008 AND BEYOND

Let us begin with two assertions, the first of which is commonplace but the second is not; both are true.

- (1) First of all, there would not have been GAFCON in Jerusalem June 22-28 had not The Episcopal Church in its arrogance, but legalistically following its canon law, consecrated Gene Robinson in 2003 as a bishop, and thereby precipitated an on-going crisis of identity and authority within the Anglican Family of Churches.**
- (2) Secondly, there would not have been either GAFCON in June 2008, or even the consecration of Gene Robinson in 2003, if The Episcopal Church had not in 1973 changed its marriage canon.**

In 1973 this Church abandoned the basic, common Anglican position on marriage, which was in its books from its separation from the Church of England in the 1780s, and introduced (what sociologists of the time were calling) “expressive individualism” into the Church’s marriage law. In real terms, this meant that instead of each person – the man and the woman -- marrying the other into an already existing, order of creation and grace, ordained by God, and blessed by the church, each was now free to marry the other into a revised, human order, with space therein to fulfill his and her own self-interests, while receiving – in the spirit of those times -- the blessing of the (revisionist) Church.

In this innovatory order, sanctioned by The Episcopal Church, procreation was seen as optional even for those in good health, and, further, a second or third marriage in church was deemed acceptable, if required by failure of an earlier one. It was, of course, the period when the general availability of “safe” artificial birth control was widespread in the West and when “rights-monism,” and the power of therapeutic accounts of life, were much in vogue, each giving strength to the new approach to marriage and to expressive individualism.

Obviously within this new ethos and practical theology, there was a major opportunity for those committed to homosexual relations to develop their agenda and focus their claims, as they made their witness for full acceptance in The Episcopal Church. In fact they did this in all kinds of sustained and “smart” ways. Looking back one can see that they walked through the doors opened by the new “order of marriage” and even claimed that, with a few changes of nouns and pronouns, they could use the new texts of the church marriage service for the blessing of their same-sex partnerships!

Where Anglicans are after GAFCON and before, during and after LAMBETH

What this background may suggest to some is that from July 2008 onwards the problem faced by “biblically-based” and “orthodox” Anglican leadership in the Western Churches is not simply that of opposing same-sex blessings and partnerships and making general assertions about the right kind of sexual relations within marriage only; but more broadly and deeply, of making a major effort at restoring with clarity and in power for the West the biblical, Christian doctrine of marriage as received in the Anglican Way – which is proclaimed and set out in the Service of Holy Matrimony of the historic *Book of Common Prayer* in its primary, authentic edition in use in the West (1662 England; but supplemented by 1962 Canada, & 1928 PECUSA).

At this point, as it were, we begin to tread on toes and perhaps cause offence! Yet, for the Gospel’s sake, we need to proceed. One pressing reason for this needed, immediate and high vocation of restoration of the doctrine of Holy Matrimony is that the minority in the U.S.A., which supports and is part of GAFCON, and which styles itself “orthodox” in the TEC and in the Anglican movements in the USA generally, is, in fact, in most of its expressions deeply itself affected by expressive individualism in its record of, and witness to, marriage. It is well known that its divorce rates and practice of serial monogamy are at national average, with a high proportion of its Ministers divorced, remarried and most are actually still working in full pastoral settings.

Thus the tragedy is that both the “orthodox” and “the revisionists” in the American Anglican Way, inside and outside The Episcopal Church with its all innovations and dysfunctionality, are much alike in that they reap the fruit of the revolutionary early innovations of the 1970s in The Episcopal Church. That is: (1) all have drunk deeply of the Liturgy found in The Episcopal Prayer Book of 1979, and/or of its various additions and extensions since; (2) all have continued in a strong or weak form of “expressive individualism in life-style and worship”; and (3) all have continued to drink deeply in the well of human rights, as a major force of moral guidance and self-direction. Where the two groups differ is that the “orthodox”, unlike the “revisionists”, do not believe that “expressive individualism in life-style and worship” ought to lead to homosexual activity and partnerships, which they see as under the judgment of the Lord. And, of course, in real terms this is in today’s situation a very big difference which should not be stated as to deny how much common ground there is in the current situation in Anglicanism.

On the Back Burner for Lambeth, July 2008

When you open the classic *Book of Common Prayer* in any of its authentic editions, the first service to leap from the page is not usually “The Form of the Solemnization of Matrimony” even

though, in terms of the amount of pages in the Book, it is somewhere near the center! After all this is ***The Book of Common Prayer***—prayer for morning and evening daily, weekly Litany and Holy Communion, and so on. Marriage is one of the “Rites and Ceremonies,” which include the Visitation of the Sick and the Burial of the Dead, provided in the Prayer Book for important but occasional use.

In the ups and downs of the life of the Church in history, and within the providence of Almighty God, sometimes what is “an occasional office/service” assumes a critical and outstanding role, symbolism and doctrine. I suggest that “The Form of the Solemnization of Matrimony” in ***The Book of Common Prayer*** (1662) is there on the back burner of the Anglican, Lambeth stove, ready to be placed at the front, and allowed to become “hot” and to “boil.”

You may ask: What is it about this short Service (only eleven pages in the pew edition) which makes it so important and deserving of full visibility and tasting at this time of crisis of Anglican identity and of teaching on sexual relations? Here is a brief answer.

Negatively, it avoids both the dominant expressive individualism of the post 1960s and the extreme rights-monism of the same period, not to mention the strong therapeutic presentations of human relationships much in vogue also. In other words, it presents marriage in a perspective and in a way that is unique in the West at this time, except through this kind of mirror, as it were.

Positively, it presents—howbeit in classic prose of the seventeenth century which is powerful when appreciated—a fully biblical and traditional Rite and Ceremony for the joining of a man and a woman in holy matrimony, both according to the laws of human society and to the eternal law of God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, the Holy Trinity.

Comment on the BCP 1662 Rite of Holy Matrimony

What causes this Rite to stand out so clearly, over and above all other more recent forms of marriage in Anglican Prayer Books, is its clear doctrine in specific areas. These are the very areas which first in the “Enlightenment” world of the eighteenth and beyond, and then in the human rights world of the twentieth century and beyond, have been attacked, spurned and often eclipsed. In fact Anglicans/Episcopalians have often been the ones to attack and remove them!

First of all, in the Preface to the Service, the clear relation of the holy duty and privilege of procreation (--think of it, creating new life in union with the one, unique Creator) in the context of one-flesh, holy union and growing friendship of man and woman, husband and wife, is stated as God’s will, and not negotiable!

Secondly, the whole content of the Service makes it clear that the man and woman are entering into an already existing order of creation, ordained by God himself, to which is added the rich blessing of the new covenant of grace. The Husband and Wife are not creating a new relationship and space for themselves, but entering into God's existing relations or order and into his holy space. Thus they do not make up their own vows and promises but they make those already there—and in the U.S.A. they say “I will” and not “I do”!

Thirdly, the relation of order into which the man and woman enter in the covenant of marriage before God, the Holy Trinity, is most graciously and clearly that of “the man first in order and the woman second in order, but both equal before God as persons.” This is clearly stated in the promise made by the woman to the man; but, the context of love in which it is made, is clearly stated in the promise of the man to the woman first of all! Further, and this is often missed, this teaching of what is often called “male headship” is shown to be clearly scriptural and apostolic by the presentation of the duties of Man and Wife as given at the end of the Service from Ephesians 5; Colossians 3; and 1 Peter 3. These passages are part of the Service! [As an aside, the doctrine of the Marriage service in terms of the relation of husband and wife is the doctrine one uses to interpret the Ordinal in its teaching of the duties of the Minister in the home and parish!]

As I have indicated above, this genuine Anglican doctrine of marriage from the primary Formulary of the Anglican Way, The BCP 1662, has been eroded at these distinct points:

by dropping its God-given order and making it primarily a human arrangement and contract which we ask God (who loves us!) to bless;

by the making of pro-creation an option, even for healthy people so that a fruit of the one-flesh union is negated;

and by the allowing of the entry into the current ethos of marriage both rights-monism and expressive individualism (opening the door not only for the advance of the homosexual cause but of much more as well).

Lambeth 2008 will be the opportunity, provided by the providence of the Lord, for any courageous and wise Bishops from the West, along with committed and judicious lay supporters of the Anglican Way, to place on the front of the stove and bring to the boil this profound Doctrine of Marriage. They have an opportunity, which should not be missed, for making it the sound basis in recovering a genuinely, orthodox Christian doctrine of Holy Matrimony.

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