

Chapter five: Marriage and children

This chapter has comments on the following services in the Leader's Book:

PASTORAL SERVICES

The Marriage Service
Reaffirmation of Marriage
Thanksgiving for the Gift of
a Child

The Reaffirmation of
Marriage service does not
appear in the People's
Book.

PERSPECTIVES

Two background questions need to be asked. Who celebrates marriage, and What is a marriage service? The *Marriage Act* of the Commonwealth of Australia speaks of 'Marriage celebrants' and means the clergy or other authorised persons. In this, the parliament reflects the Protestant tradition of colonial Australia. Roman Catholic teaching, however, would lay emphasis on *the couple* as the true celebrants of the rite. It is clear in Reformed liturgies, from Luther onwards, that the minister has a central role in the marriage service. This is true even where the minister is not the representative of the State. The theological reason is the ecclesial, the churchly, nature of marriage. Marriage certainly happens between two persons, and other people must respect the privacy of that relationship; but marriage is given for a sign of God's love in the church (hence the frequent use of the image from Ephesians 5, as in the Declaration of Purpose: 'It signifies the mystery of the union between Christ and the church'), as well as for the good order of society. Marriage happens to a community, family, friends, church, world. And this the presidency of a minister may signify.

What is the service of marriage then? Dr Stevenson's answer is very simple: 'Human resolve and divine blessing are what Christian marriage is about' [p. 171]. These provide the two central elements of the service: the giving of consent, and the invocation of God's blessing. Marriage liturgies have these at their heart, but fill them out, especially through scripture and other offerings, to make a celebration of worship. The worship of God is the context in which two people take each other in marriage and pray for God's blessing on their future.

For convenience's sake, services relating to Marriage, Healing, Funerals, etc. have been placed together in a separate section entitled 'Pastoral Services'. Of course, the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are also pastoral services. Their separation from these other services does not mean that, whereas the sacraments proclaim the gospel, the others arise from human situations. That is why this commentary insists at every point that the gospel is the focus of all liturgies, and that each one is defined by what the church teaches about marriage, sickness, relationships, death and dying, and is not a form of sanctified psychology.

The study of the marriage liturgy has recently come in from the cold through two major (and interconnected) studies by the English Anglican scholar Dr Kenneth Stevenson, on whose work this author happily acknowledges his dependence. Ecumenical research into the whole range of traditions and liturgies has benefited all the churches in their current revisions.

THE NOTES (LB 373)

Thus the notes begin by insisting on the prior claim of a church building as the place for the marriage service, not because Gothic (or whatever) is better, but because the church's building is the canopy over all it believes and celebrates. Here the church baptises and buries, here the Word is proclaimed and the bread broken, here the hospitality of God touches old and young, black and white, rich and poor, male and female. Here are covenants made.

Note (i). It may be asked whether any special procession of the bride is a hangover of a former view of her subservience, whatever the liturgy says. Should not the bridegroom be welcomed also, and not merely in the vestry? Option (c) is sometimes simply the most truthful way of some couples arriving at the church for their wedding; but it may be a proper recognition of the status of bride and groom as free adults. See also Note (xiii).

Note (iii). Equally there is much more in the seating of the bridal party than first appears. Certainly it is a practical move if there is to be a Service of the Word of any length — and we should not have readings and homily if they are to appear as mere preliminaries. But the custom, for instance in some European churches, of having a special, grand pair of chairs for the couple suggests thrones, and sees a wedding as a royal occasion for anyone, rich or poor (see note viii), and a sign of the kingdom of God. In the Eastern churches, this is symbolised by the crowning of the couple. The couple should not merely be seated, but seated in honour.

Note (iv). This encouragement of participation by family members and friends further strengthens the churchly aspect of the marriage service. But the minister or some other skilled person needs to give time to rehearse the participants. It is important that the scriptures be read intelligently and clearly, and prayers offered in the Spirit.

Note (v). Again the ecclesial nature of marriage is symbolised by it taking place in the context of the eucharist, and not least by the fact that all may partake — not just the couple and their attendants. This will require time, which ought not to be the only consideration, but the whole service should not be hurried. Elders and other local congregational leaders will need to be involved here.

Note (vii). Signing the registers in the presence of the whole congregation underlines the role of the people as witnesses — and supporters — of the marriage.

Note (xv). Certainly our liturgies need richer symbolism, in the face of the trivialisation of marriage by popular sentiment, photography, and much else. The binding together of the couple's hands in the minister's stole or scarf is a dramatic symbol with a clear meaning. It has some disadvantages, however. It may make the minister's role seem more significant than it is: it looks as if the minister is 'performing' the marriage rather than 'proclaiming' it (see the words of #13 Proclamation of the Marriage, LB 390). It may also interrupt the flow of the service from vows to exchange of rings, proclamation to blessing. If the action can be done simply and without a great deal of wrapping and unwrapping, well and good.

THE MARRIAGE SERVICE THE GATHERING OF THE COMMUNITY

This heading recognises that marriage takes place in the widest context of society, but it is primarily the church which gathers.

In some circumstances, the church may need to fight to be heard! Ministers (and couples) need to guard against the ways in which cultural customs invade the liturgy and distort or cheapen its meaning. Requests, for example, for the omission of a sermon, or for a service held out of doors, or for music which reflects a sentimental understanding of human love, or the demands of aggressive photographers and of wielders of video-cameras need to be firmly resisted.

1 GREETING

The words appear also in the People's Book, enabling participation in responses. To the purposes stated, the next revision may add 'to ask God's blessing on them'.

The minister may take the opportunity to welcome guests on behalf of the couple and their families, and to help everyone enter into a spirit of worship.

4 DECLARATION OF PURPOSE

See Note (xii). The reasons apply to everyone, not just to this couple, and therefore should not be altered. The minister may need to wait until the congregation has settled down after the opening part of the ceremony before reading this important introduction.

THE SERVICE OF THE WORD

The practice of giving a Bible to the couple became popular in French and Swiss Reformed rites of the 19th century. The minister may wish to compose a form of words for its presentation which emphasises that the scriptures witness to the love of God in Christ in whom they will live their married life. The gospel is not only an inspiration, it is the divine reality of love.

However, the giving of the Bible might be kept until the very end of the service, since in *this* context it is an ancillary symbol.

6 SERMON

See Note (xviii) and reverse the priorities. The sermon need not be long, but there is a great need to take opportunities to tell our society what the church teaches about marriage. They will hear it from few other sources. Of course, this does not diminish the opportunity to speak pastorally to the couple from the experience of having prepared them for this day.

Orders of Service

The PB contains the whole service with the congregation's responses. If these are in the seats, the people may be encouraged to follow them. However, it must be admitted that this is not usual even in church weddings at the moment, and it may be best for the couple to print the major and sub-headings of the Marriage Service, and the hymns, on a card which is issued to guests. This at least allows for some verbal participation in the service, though care must be taken to avoid breach of copyright. See note (vi).



Photo: Margaret Lowe

THE MARRIAGE

8 DECLARATION OF INTENT

The first question, which is optional, provides an opportunity for a Christian couple to acknowledge that their marriage is a vocation in which they are under the authority of God. The next two questions, which are mandatory, concern the intention of the two individuals, in the sense of what is their will. 'Is it your will, as a free adult, to give yourself . . . ?' Thus the answer is not 'yes', but 'I will (so)'. Originally this was doubtless to guard against forced marriages, but the western tradition has always regarded the giving of consent as a central part of a marriage.

The emphasis is not, however, on legal contract. The image of covenant is the central one.

'Covenant emphasizes both the 'objective' side of marriage as an act of God in the Christian assembly by two people, as well as the 'subjective' side of marriage as a mystery of life in which the partners, their friends, and relatives have to grow in a life-long union.'
Kenneth Stevenson, *To Join Together: The Rite of Marriage*, Pueblo, New York, 1987, p. 118.

Covenant is a dynamic image, with overtones of joyful commitment which no notion of 'contract' can approach.

9 AFFIRMATION BY THE FAMILIES

This is the new action to replace the old 'Giving Away'. In strong terms, Note (xiii) rejects the former custom. The keynote is mutuality: both families are invited to give their support either through both sets of parents or through some representative members.

What we have here is a vestige of a much older rite, part of the betrothal which took place before the actual wedding. That was the proper context of the exchange of approvals by the families. Some families will warmly appreciate the opportunity to express their support.

10 AFFIRMATION BY THE PEOPLE

No-one will doubt the value of one's friends expressing support for a married couple. The note of the Christian — and perhaps wider — community is sounded again in the service.

The second form (LB 386), being a kind of charge, obviates the need for the congregation to reply. If people have their book in their hand, or the service is printed, a verbal response is surely preferable.

11 THE VOWS

In each case, both partners make the same vows.

The couple face each other and address each other. In a literate society there is no need for people to repeat, parrot-fashion, the words or phrases after the minister, which in any case intrudes into the exchange of vows between the couple. It is a useful exercise for them to write or type their vows out on a card and give it to the minister at

the rehearsal. The minister then holds the card for them and they read it out loud. If a couple has really prepared themselves, they will virtually know the vow by heart; however, it is seldom possible for them actually to recite it at the wedding.

Vows A are the traditional English vows, dating from Thomas Cranmer's translation of the mediaeval Sarum rite, and which are so deeply embedded in English-speaking Christianity that some echo of them is likely to be heard until the end of time. Vows B update them. It is certainly important that the vows recognise both the trials and the joys of the married relationship. There are no better texts on which to base marriage preparation courses than these.

Vows C say the same things in less poetic language (the old vows lend themselves to repetition or learning by heart precisely because of their internal linguistic structure).

Vows D involve a public declaration followed by an address to the partner. The rubrics to Vows D state more clearly the custom for all vows: namely, that the groom takes the bride's hand (usually the right) and makes his vows; then they loose hands, and she, as a separate person and of her own volition, takes his hand and repeats the vows. The action is the same, but there is value in each doing it separately. The second loosing of hands is to facilitate the exchange of rings.

The United Methodist Church (U.S.A.) devised an alternative service with the following blessing:

Bless, O Lord, the giving of these rings (or other symbols), that they who wear them may live in your peace, and continue in your favour all the days of their life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

— 'A Service of Christian Marriage',
Supplemental Worship Resources 5,
Abingdon 1975.

It is interesting to note that in his 1784 revision of the *Book of Common Prayer* for Methodist use in North America, Wesley followed the prejudices of his Puritan ancestors and omitted the ring altogether. It did not take long for couples to ask for it again, a sign of the tenacity of certain customs! The Primitive Methodist rite of 1860 provided the bride with words to say as she received the ring as a token of love and fidelity. When each gives a ring, there is no need for this response.

12 GIVING OF THE RINGS

The prayer over the rings is optional. In the struggle to avoid invoking a blessing on inanimate objects, some clarity has been lost in the petition. There is no difficulty in asking God to bless the giving of these rings as a sign of the vows made.

Most couples today exchange rings, but there is provision here for a single ring.

13 PROCLAMATION OF THE MARRIAGE

Marriage occurs when two people pledge their word and exchange vows. The giving of a ring is a public sign of this exchange. The prayer for blessing actually spells out the meaning of the ring. In earlier societies, coins and other gifts were exchanged as well. But now the minister declares that the marriage has taken place in the sight of God and these witnesses.

The quotation from Mark 10:6–9 (or, in most earlier services, Matthew 19:6) has been read at this point for generations. Preachers are referred to the commentaries for the meaning of a complex passage!

THE BLESSING OF THE MARRIAGE

Note that this is a major heading, one of the two central actions of the liturgy of marriage.

14 ACCLAMATIONS

These responses are clearly Trinitarian, but the idea of such a series of blessings is Jewish. One of the Jewish blessings at a marriage reads, 'Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of the universe, who created joy



Photo: Margaret Lowe

and happiness, bridegroom and bride, love and companionship, peace and friendship'. The British Methodist service takes these phrases up in a thanksgiving prayer. In the future, so might we, since one of our problems is that our language of joy is so muted.

15 BLESSING

In both alternatives, the attempt has been made to heighten the language. This is the Nuptial Blessing, ultimately the reason for a couple marrying in the church. People may exchange vows or ask God's blessing anywhere; but in the church's worship, that blessing is made explicit through the church's ministry.

The rubric suggests that the couple may kneel or stand; the minister may underscore the solemnity of this moment by raising one or both hands for the blessing.

16 THE PEACE

Now that the sign of peace has been restored to the worship of the Uniting Church, the 'wedding kiss' can return to its original meaning, which was not the stuff of movies, but the 'holy kiss' of fellow Christians. It speaks of God's love and the special relationship of Christians in the Lord, rather than of human affection (though the latter is not excluded!). And it spills over into a general greeting in the congregation.

SIGNING THE REGISTERS

Many people will find this point more convenient for the signing of registers, especially if it is done in the church and in the sight of all the people. After the Peace, the congregation sits, or sings a hymn, and the bridal party moves to a table. It is best to provide a decent chair, since it is easier to sign sitting down! After all have signed, the Wedding Certificate may be presented and the photographers satisfied; the bridal party then returns to their original positions standing before the Lord's Table for the prayers.

17 PRAYERS

These are, in terms of the Service of the Lord's Day, Prayers of the People, and it is good to encourage members of one of the families or friends to lead them, and work with the couple in choosing the petitions, and perhaps even adding some.

Prayer A works well with two people leading alternate petitions and beginning the response to which the congregation replies. The options on LB 394 about children allow the adaptation of the service to the circumstances of a particular couple.

B offers a selection of prayers for the couple, and then adds a prayer for their families, and finally for all family life. Each of these three prayers (LB 395–396) is in fact a Nuptial Blessing. The first, on LB 395, was originally written for the Episcopal Church, for The Blessing of the Marriage, but in the form here has been truncated. However, some of its rich imagery remains — 'Let their love . . . be a seal . . . a mantle . . . a crown'.

The Blessing of the Marriage — Episcopal Church/ Anglican Church of Canada

Most gracious God,
we give you thanks for your tender love
in sending Jesus Christ to come among us,
to be born of a human mother,
and to make the way of the cross to be the way of life.
We thank you, also,
for consecrating the union of man and woman in his name.
By the power of your Holy Spirit,
pour out the abundance of your blessing
upon this man and this woman.
Defend them from every enemy.
Lead them into all peace.
Let their love for each other be a seal upon their hearts,
a mantle about their shoulders,
and a crown upon their foreheads.
Bless them in their work and in their companionship;
in their sleeping and in their waking;
in their joys and in their sorrows;
in their life and in their death.
Finally, in your mercy, bring them to that table
where your saints feast for ever in your heavenly home;
through Jesus Christ, who with you and the Holy Spirit
lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever.

Book of Common Prayer, 1979, pp. 430–31

18 THE LORD'S PRAYER

Unless the service is printed on a sheet, the traditional form should be used.

19 HOLY COMMUNION

See the comment on note v above.

The table, having been set with the elements beforehand, is now unveiled, or the couple or their families 'set the table' with bread and wine. (See the relevant comments in the commentary on The Service of the Lord's Day.)

A form of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving is provided on LB 400–402; or the Great Prayer of the Uniting Church may be used (LB 92ff) with the special thanksgiving for Marriage (LB 100) inserted. The bread is broken (LB 126) and communion shared (LB 128). A Prayer after Communion (LB 129 or resources at LB 655) is appropriate, before the service ends with (a hymn and) the Blessing (from the Service of the Lord's Day, LB 130) or the Marriage Service (LB 400).

22 SIGNING OF THE MARRIAGE CERTIFICATES

If this is to be done in the vestry, it is better done at this point; otherwise after the Peace, as above. When all is concluded, the minister invites the people to stand for the recessional.

Marriage and music

It has to be said that the range of music seen as possible in wedding ceremonies today is very narrow. This means that the faith itself — which surrounds a couple who marry in a church — is also diminished, and the hospitality offered non-members loses its evangelical dimension. Musicians and ministers need to work together to raise the consciousness of people to the importance of music expressing their faith and the significance of the occasion.

Note x sets this out, and gives a list of suitable hymns and songs from the AHB. Unless the couple has been involved in the leadership of worship in the congregation, it is unlikely that they will have much idea of the possibilities. Perhaps the organist could prepare an audio-tape with suitable processional and recessional marches, and the tunes of a selected list of hymns and songs. Often the well-worn is chosen because they do not know the alternatives. The church whose choir is willing to give up the occasional Saturday to lead singing is a fortunate one indeed: but the church should be offering this kind of ministry in order to 'rescue' weddings for the joyful and participatory occasions they should be.

A REAFFIRMATION OF MARRIAGE LB 403. (No service in PB)

Marriage Services often have a semi-private air about them: they mostly occur at weekends; the congregation is selective and disperses again. Certainly the Marriage Service provides an occasion when the Christian understanding

of marriage might be referred to (apart from the liturgy itself), but there are limits of time and concentration. When do we take opportunity, in the ordinary life of the church, to set forth the church's teaching on marriage? The lectionary gives only a rare opportunity (for example Jesus' teaching on divorce). Very occasionally, a Christian couple chooses to marry on Sunday, and during their congregation's normal worship — a lovely thing to do. But in the wider context of increasing divorce, of children growing up in relationships other than their parents' marriage, of many couples choosing to live without any formal covenant together, our members need moments to affirm the value, the joy, of marriage.

Note (ii) sets out some of the pastoral occasions on which this service of Reaffirmation might be used. Anniversaries are an obvious occasion, when a couple and their extended family might come to their church for this purpose. A minister may invite the couples he/she has married in the last, say, five years, to come to reaffirm their vows. It may be the outcome of a 'marriage enrichment' weekend. Or it may occur after a period of separation or other interruption to the normal relationship, as a sign of reconciliation (see also A Service of Healing — the healing of a personal relationship, LB 421).

1 INTRODUCTION

A shortened form of that in the Marriage Service itself.

2 REAFFIRMATION OF VOWS

Two possibilities are offered, depending on whether the dominant note is thanksgiving (A) or recommitment (B). Both speak of commitment, but one set says 'reaffirm' and the other 'renew'.

There is no need to loose hands between the renewal of vows, the pattern which is usual in the original marriage ceremony. The two are one!

3 BLESSING

These two forms are the same as the Blessing of a Marriage (see LB 392), thus completing the twofold pattern in the rite, of vows and nuptial blessing. It would be appropriate for the couple to kneel and the people to stand.

4 AFFIRMATION BY THE PEOPLE

It will be especially helpful for a couple coming together after some difficulties to know that they have the support of their friends and of the congregation. Equally, other couples will rejoice in the companions who have been with them during their married life.

5 PRAYERS

Like almost all the prayers in *Uniting in Worship*, these are intended as models for the kind of thing which ought to be said, but which the leader will make personal.



Photo: Eddy Marmur

THANKSGIVING FOR THE GIFT OF A CHILD

The birth of a child is a miracle of quite sufficient proportions to warrant thanksgiving to God. The arrival of a child by adoption has often been quite literally an answer

to prayer. This service begins with the gifts of God in human life and the response of gratitude. Parents may wish to bring their child to church at the earliest opportunity, or to invite the minister and other members of their families and the church to the home or hospital and to join them in giving thanks.

The service may well be a prelude to baptism. Some parts of it could precede the service for Baptism of a Child (LB 35) or be included in the intercessions. Since baptism is not about human birth, and does not happen only to infants, no reference is made to thanksgiving for birth in that sacrament. The two services are probably better held at different times.

The service is also an alternative to baptism for parents who wish to give thanks to God for the arrival of the child, but who cannot undertake the obligations implied in baptism. Some parents may indeed be fully committed to the church, but have doubts, for example, about the propriety of infant baptism. It is right to respect these hesitations, though the Uniting Church is fully committed to the baptism of the children of Christian parents and others 'for whose instruction and nourishment in the faith the Church takes responsibility.' (*Basis of Union*, paragraph 7)

One might say that this service lies in the realm of creation, in contrast with baptism, which is about redemption in Christ. Baptism moves a person away from natural birth (see John 3:3) and normal human family ties to the universal love of Christ. See, for example, Jesus' hard word to his earthly family at Mark 3:33, 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother'; and Paul's rejection of all human distinctions in Galatians 3:27–28, the baptismal context of which is often forgotten:

For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Therefore the two Thanksgiving prayers (LB 413) speak entirely of God's work in creation, of which human life is a parable: 'like a mother who comforts her children' God comforts us in our loneliness; 'like a father who cares for his children' God watches over our life; and 'we thank you for creating him/her in your image'. And although this service is about creation, and the miracle of birth, it is not a 'churching of women' or in any sense a purification after childbirth.

But one of the problems is that this *looks* like a baptismal service! A couple with their child, at the front of the church, with minister saying prayers . . . so it is worth taking a few steps to lessen the possible confusion. The couple should not stand near the font (note iii). The minister does not in fact take the child into his/her arms (note iv). For the rest, given the richness of our current baptismal service, the distinction should be clear. Note the prayer suggested at #7, which prays that the child might be brought to baptism at a later stage.

This is a service which allows couples to preserve the integrity of their belief or lack of it. It does not ask them to make responses they cannot carry through. It allows them genuinely to thank God and to rejoice in the gift of a child. And it allows baptism to have its full evangelical

significance as a response to the gospel, distinct from the proper human feelings at the arrival of a new child.

This service should encourage us to make the most of the specifically Christian act of baptism by underlining the part that faith plays in that sacrament; baptism is not a thanksgiving for human birth or human adoption. And if we do not diminish the visible, audible, tangible sign of water at baptism, no-one will mistake what we are doing.

