

“Have ye not read?” Matthew 19:4-6. Sermon for the Marriage of Elizabeth Ruth Curry and Evan Archibald King.

St George’s Round Church, Saturday the seventeenth of August, two thousand thirteen, at the Solemn Celebration of the Eucharist.

**W**hat have we here? On the one side, compact beauty, intensely concentrated on what she is doing now, but, nimbly and decisively, moving to the next task. On the other, a looooooong slooooooow drink of something stronger than water, whose email address is “sleeeeeeeepy” with EIGHT e’s. He has been compared to a benign snake stretched out in the sun on a warm rock, and, indeed, my first inspiration was to preach on the text: “the serpent was the most subtle of all the beasts which the Lord God had made” from the story of the Fall, but I decided that the Old Serpent himself had sent this idea, and, in any case, appearances do not tell the whole story, somehow somewhere under that rock sleeeeeeeepy has read **everything** and read it deeply.

Something typically Nova Scotian is going on here: what is warring elsewhere, is here convivial. This time the two ends of Ireland. On the one side, a die hard Anglican from far down the Eastern Shore, where the ladies move back and forth between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries without much discernable difference, and where more than a tincture of Presbyterian teetotalism and perfectionism lingers. Until this ceremony ends that, she will have been known as “Miss Modest”. On the other, a remnant Roman Catholic (combining Fitzpatrick, Donahue, and Lourdes!) from Shelburne, which has a better claim to the title of “the home of lost causes” than Oxford University ever had, and where, apparently, the quintessential spirit of the Catholic Celtic Emerald Isle still brings forth poets who are philosophers, and philosophers who are poets.

As you know Evan and Elizabeth nurtured their friendship in my seminar and both wrote their Masters’ theses with me. The doctrinal consequences of our common inquiries will provide the theological substance of this sermon, but, before we reach that, there is another very telling contrast to which we must attend.

Last June, as the absolutely immovable deadline for the submission of the thesis on which his scholarship and place at Cambridge both depended, “sleeeeeeeepy”, immured in a dank basement of St Peter’s Cathedral, Charlottetown, working on a computer so old, in a programme so archaic, that **nothing** transferred to others correctly, was just short of the maximum words for a **doctoral** dissertation at Oxford and was determined to keep on writing! The notes and much else were chaotic. I was desperate. From Halifax, I kept yelling STOP. Apparently, I could not be heard in that basement. So I decreed that 30,000 words must be cut and sent Elizabeth to show that looooooong snake how to make the small beautiful. The excellent result you know.

On the fifth of June, just past, after quashing my teeth for months trying to get texts from Elizabeth, desperate **for exactly the opposite reason** than in the previous Summer, I sent her a message entitled "A Human Bomb". "Must I wrap myself in dynamite and steel bolts, embrace you, and blow myself up," I asked, "to get another chapter out of you? I want one NOW! TODAY!" And forth the thesis came in order, completely researched, perfectly annotated, lovely in conception, precise in its argument, beautiful in its style and compact construction. And I am told at the end that looooooong snake aided the last fecundity.

**O**pposition in the same, the need of contraries for each other, complementarity, this is fecund, creative, productive. This is the structure of God in Himself, of the world He made, and of ourselves. The Indefinite lies before opposition and complementary, the infinity of the Divine Nothing. Being, variegated, endlessly multiple, but ordered, beautiful, and full comes forth in difference and contrariety.

Thus our text from the Gospel according to St Matthew: "Have ye not read, that he who made them, from the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together let not man put asunder."

Our Lord Jesus, questioned about divorce, carries us back to Genesis: in the beginning, Ἐν ἀρχῇ. From, by, and in that ἀρχῇ, beginning **and** cause, is fixed the mutual attraction and union of flesh upon which human life depends. For our Lord, the ἀρχῇ, the beginning and cause, and in our Lord, the Λογος, the fundamental logic and deep nature of things, is established the indissolubility of these opposites united. The Anglican Church (*The Book of Common Prayer*, 1548-1662), repeating the millennium old Latin prayers of the Catholic Church, follows its Lord. Blessing the newly wed couple, the priest declares "**GOD**, who by thy mighty power hast made all things of nothing; who also (after other things set in order) did appoint, that out of man (created after thine own image and similitude) woman should take her beginning; and, knitting them together, did teach that it should never be lawful to put asunder those whom thou by Matrimony had made one." [*Deus, qui potestate virtutis tuae de nihilo cuncta fecisti: qui dispositis universitatis exordiis, homini ad imaginem Dei facto, ideo inseparabile mulieris adjutorium condidisti, ut femineo corporali de virili dares carne principium, docens quod ex uno placuisset institute, numquam licere disjungi.*]

Following our Lord's direction, we are led back to the *de nihilo*, the primal nothing from which God creates everything in order and, according to that order, makes us in His own image. By way of metaphysics and physics, of theology and anthropology, of flesh and bone and spirit, she leads us to high mystery: "GOD" the priest continues, "has consecrated conjugal union to such an excellent mystery that in it is signified and represented the spiritual marriage and unity betwixt Christ and his Church." [*Deus, qui tam excellenti mysterio conjugalem copulam consecrasti, ut Christi et Ecclesiae sacramentum praesignares in foedere nuptiarum...*] [Prayer Book translation modified by me to correspond better to the Latin text.] This is what we heard from St Paul. And to him we turn to find what the mystery conveys.

The heart of the mystery is submission, mutual submission, certainly of wife to husband, but, equally, according to the ordered pattern, of husband to wife, "submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God." "As the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it...So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourishes it and cherishes it, even as the Lord the church: for we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones." From body, flesh and bones, Paul takes us back to the words of Moses quoted by our Lord: "For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh." Ephesians 5.21-32.

**A**ll is giving and receiving: God Himself, being, and ourselves in his image are a mutual submission, mutual subjection, giving and receiving. Charles Williams writes: "At the beginning of life in the natural order is an act of substitution and co-inherence. A man can have no child unless his seed is received and carried by a woman; a woman can have no child unless she receives and carries the seed of a man—literally bearing the burden. It is not only a mutual act; it is a mutual act of substitution. The child itself for nine months literally co-inheres in its mother; there is no human creature that has not sprung from such a period of such an interior growth." "Postscript", *The Descent of the Dove* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 234.

Giving and receiving, this mutual opposition, this conjugal submission of opposites to each other, is the image and likeness of the triune God, the inmost being of all which is. Elizabeth, Evan and I read Thomas Aquinas together, and the Saint is radically clear and dangerously forthcoming about what God as three persons essentially one and equal is. God is the infinite fullness given and received as knower and known, and the same infinite fullness given and received as lover and beloved. The Father submits all that He is to being known as the Son, the Son receives all that He is as the knowledge of the Father; together they submit to the unity of lover and beloved as the Spirit. All else is unfolding, participation, likeness of this. Theophany, God made manifest.

Into this giving and receiving of their lives to and from each other Elizabeth and Evan here enter. No! that is incorrect. The truth is that we are all already in, everything is in, indeed, at its root, everything is, that mutual giving and receiving, that mutual subjection. We may deny it but we cannot avoid it. What the serpent promised shall be, what we fell in desiring shall be. We shall be as gods. This our Lord certifies (Genesis 3.5, Psalm 82.6, John 10.34-35). What Elizabeth and Evan here enter is the knowing loving embrace of this divine reality in and through one another. This knowing loving embrace St Thomas says will make them the dwelling of the Most Holy Trinity, Himself the giving and receiving of knowledge and love. Their loving knowledge will save neither them nor us from the terrible things God is sending on the earth at our ever more rapidly increasing demand for judgment, but this knowing love is Ecstasy, God's and ours, and Joy, God's and ours. This must be enough and it is enough. Let us pray that their lives together prove this sufficiency.

**T**hat we may set the pattern of this ecstasy and joy, we make present here again, and enter through this sacrament, Christ's marriage to his Body by his death for Her. Physics, body, flesh, and blood, εϑος και θανατος make the conjugal union of Christ and his Church. The lowest and the highest submit to each other. In the loving union the Spirit gives, we plead His self-giving death for the world, for ourselves, and especially for Elizabeth and Evan that in each other "beholding...the glory of the Lord, they will be changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3.18 modified).

Dr Wayne Hankey