

“They were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed”

Genesis 2.24

Sermon for the Solemnization of Matrimony between James Bryson and Kristi

Assaly

With the celebration of the Holy Eucharist

St George’s Round Church

August 20, 2011

We have just heard and enacted an immortal masterpiece of the English language. Kristi was a leader in our Prayer Book liturgies at King’s College and St George’s Church and James’ studies have carried him to the 16th century when Archbishop Cranmer composed it; we share his satisfaction that it remains largely unchanged. How appropriate and splendid that Kristi and he have chosen its beauty and its theology for their wedding. For this is a theology of marriage of surpassing excellence, precisely because it displays, like this particular wedding, the union of the East and West. The present text contains updating which I shall remedy with the original.

The Solemnization of Matrimony once began “Deerly beloued **frendes**”, which in the old usage included family:

“Deerly beloved frendes, we are gathered together here in the syght of God, and in the face of this congregacion, to ioyne together this man and this woman in holy matrimonie.”

The “**we**” surprises, but, in fact, it makes all the difference. Surely, it ought to be “**they**”. **They** are the centre today. This is all about **them**. **They** are here to form a contract; **we** witness, bless and celebrate that. Certainly, the service contains this. But, more are here than “they”, and that is why **we** joyne.

Marriage is ordained, the liturgy reminds us, “for the procreation of children”. Having children is far from being only a matter of personal fulfilment; the procreation of children is essential to mankind, the family, the state, and the church and, of course, each child is an image of God. Children are each one ends in themselves. Moreover, it benefits family and society that our posterity be “brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord,” and not, as the old formula has it, that they come forth “wantonly, to satisfy mens carnal lustes and appetites, like brute beastes that haue no understanding.” The love by which children are properly nurtured seeks their eternal good. Truly, there are many more gathered at this wedding than “this man and this woman.”

Most exaltedly, the “we” who “are gathered together here in the sight of God and in the face of this congregation to join together this man and this woman” is none other than the holy Church exercising the power given her by her Lord: “Verily, I

say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 18.18). By reference to this divine power the churches of the East have administered the sacrament of matrimony. The building where we celebrate this sacrament gives a clue to how Latin and Greek are blended together in this service.

St George’s “Round” Church reminds us first of the pagan Pantheon in Rome, a temple to all the gods of the heavenly spheres, at once such a marvel of engineering and so sacred, that it is the oldest building in the world with its original roof intact, a dome which still amazes. Then Hagia Sophia in Constantinople comes to mind; that overwhelming wonder of Greek Christianity baptized this architectural form: “a dome which seems suspended from heaven” (Procopius, *The Buildings*). St George’s thus unites the Latin West and the Greek East, and pagan nature with Christian grace. In it today, James, whose Christianity and forebearers are from the far Western edge of Europe, where civilization hangs by the skin of its teeth, and Kristi, whose Christianity and forebearers are from the centre, the true omphalos kosmou, the **Holy Land**, have united. Appropriately, this marriage liturgy is a blending.

It declares marriage to be “an honorable estate instituted of God in paradise, in the time of mannes innocencie”, and in that integrity of nature James and Kristi have made vows which bind them for life. Keeping these vows will preserve the natural integrity and innocence of the unashamed union of a naked Adam and Eve in the paradisal garden. But the service goes on to another and higher view of marriage as a signification, that is to say a sacrament, of “the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church”. This consideration carries us to Cana of Galilee and Christ’s presence to another bride and groom and, there, the change wrought by the God-man of the water of nature to the grace of wine, the miraculous first sign of God’s incoming reign. The grace of the sacrament raises up nature, perfecting it so that marriage becomes a means of redemption. But the natural good is not destroyed when so directed to a higher end.

St Thomas Aquinas articulates the law much studied by James: “*Gratia naturam non tollit, sed perficit*: Grace does not destroy nature, but brings it to perfection.” The original text gives as one of the purposes of marriage: “that suche persones as bee married, might liue chastlie in matrimonie, and kepe themselues undefiled membres of Christes bodye”. Thus marriage is not only an “honorable estate”, it is also an “holy” one. The love of Kristi and James for one another drew them to pledge their vows the one to the other, and that love draws us, the church, to bless them with the power of keeping their promises and of maintaining their love. The good of natural desire is not denied: marriage was founded in paradise where “They were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed”. But, their desire is blessed only when subject to law—hear Rome speak! They have

bound themselves to love, comfort, and to honour one another, and foresaking all other to keep only each to each as long as they both shall live. When this mutual self-giving has been solemnly made, then the priest announced (and warned) that in this union more than a human and natural power has been at work: “Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder.”

This solemn warning against defying God by human sundering reminds us what **we** have taken on in this **our common** doing. By God working in nature and by grace, James and Kristi have been joined and, at the same time, their friends and families are drawn together in holding them up. Our “we” reminds us that marriages are foundations of our common life which need and demand our support. Indeed, never more so than now, when in our ruin of every integrity, nature has risen up against us as the instrument of God’s just wrath. By our presence, prayers, and holy joining, we have pledged to uphold Kristi and James in this building cataclysm. Nothing is more important in our circumstance. Having been “instituted of God in paradise, in the time of mannes innocencie”, its law and its grace restore paradise and the integrity of nature. Yet more “suche persones as bee married,” and live their vows faithfully “kepe themselues undefiled membres of Christes bodye.” Their marriage is a place of innocence and refreshment where they can be naked to one another without shame.

Robert Crouse, whose signature on James’ MA thesis, meant much to him, published extraordinarily beautiful lectures on *Images of Pilgrimage: Paradise and Wilderness in Christian Spirituality*. In them he traced the image of paradise through the poetry and philosophy of pagan Greece and Rome, the Old and New Testaments, St Augustine and Dante. He discovers:

Paradise and wilderness are not just alternatives. Paradise is to come, certainly, ...but at the same time paradise is here. ... Paradise is not just “somewhere else”; not just “eastward of Eden”; it is, even here and now, “a new heaven and a new earth”, reconciled. Christian spiritual life is neither “this-worldly” nor “other-worldly”—those are its temptations and distortions; authentically, it must be lived in the tension between these worlds, in the ambiguity between paradise attained and paradise to come.¹

Marriage is a paradise like this. It is lived in the tension between union attained and enjoyed and hope for what only work and discipline can attain.

James has been working on the modern successors of a mediaeval Irishman who has a fair claim to be called the greatest Christian speculative theologian, John Eriugena. He was the first to unite the Greek and the Latin Christian intellectual

¹ Robert D. Crouse, *Images of Pilgrimage: Paradise and Wilderness in Christian Spirituality* (Charlottetown: St Peter Publications, 1986), 43-44.

giants of the early Church. From the Greek Fathers he learned that Paradise existed neither in space nor in time. Our existence there and our fall out of Eden are, in reality, states and directions of our knowledge and love. Within time we humans must shift back and forth between two opposed definitions of ourselves, two states of our knowledge and love. We break ourselves up by the necessary knowledge and pursuit of temporal objects, and we toil outside of Eden. But, we also can hold fast to God and to one another in God and are, thus, restored to Paradise, as a place of refreshment and union.

Kristi and James begin in the Garden, where the man and his wife gave themselves openly to one another in the sight of God, “and were not ashamed.” Marriage was instituted of God there “in paradise, in the time of mannes innocencie” as “an honorable estate”. His grace will assist nature so that the fresh joy of creation can be preserved as a place of refuge for Kristi and James, an “holy estate.” There by faithful self-giving in their common life, they can “kepe themselues undefiled membres of Christes bodye” and inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven. This we will for and with them, for this we pray for and with them, offering the Holy Sacrifice, and to this we and they pledge ourselves. In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Dr Wayne J. Hankey

Carnegie Professor of Classics and Chairman of the Department of Classics with the Programme in Religious Studies, Dalhousie University and the University of King's College.

THE FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, 2011