

Cleave

Phil 3¹²⁻¹⁶/Gen 2²⁰⁻²⁴/Ruth 1⁸⁻¹⁷

Whenever we try to master something it's important to have in our mind some basic pictures of what we are trying to achieve and how we might achieve it. I started last week a three sermon series on the fundamental dynamics of the Christian faith based on Genesis 2v24 which is the famous marriage passage in Genesis. Marriage has always been considered something special in both Judaism and in Christianity because it has significant resonance with God's relationship with us and with Creation.

Last week I spoke about the importance of '**leaving**' and how vital it was for us to create space for our walk with God and, indeed, our earthly relationships. This week we move on to the second great dynamic in that passage – **cleaving**.

²⁴Therefore a man shall **leave** his father and mother and **cleave** his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (Gen 2)

Cleave means to 'bind to strongly' or to unite but it is also the word primarily associated with the notion of covenant in the OT. Covenant is perhaps one of the most important words in all of biblical studies because it carries with it all the weight of the

biblical notion of relationship – and, in particular, God’s relationship with us. And marriage is a covenant.

In our reading from Ruth this morning the very same words used in the Genesis account to describe marriage are used to describe Ruth’s commitment to her mother-in-law Naomi. In Genesis the wife and husband are to **leave** [‘āzab] their parents and Ruth begs Naomi not to ask her to [‘āzab] her. Again in Genesis a man and a woman are to **cleave** [dābaq] to one another and, likewise in Ruth she [dābaq] to her mother-in-law that she might travel with her and be a good daughter to her in her deep grief.

This is significant because the book of Ruth is considered to be a metaphor of God’s faithful commitment to Israel – of His covenant with the nation. So Ruth is a ‘type’ for God. Her faithfulness to Naomi is indicative of God’s faithfulness to us; her love for Naomi indicative of God’s love for us and her ‘**self-emptying**’ indicative of God’s self-giving for us.

And the key to the notion of covenant is that it is essentially unilateral, that is, is it first and foremost a commitment on behalf of one person only. So Ruth’s promise doesn’t depend on Naomi’s condition. Naomi send her home saying this would be best for her. But Ruth’s loyalty to Naomi is not dependent on what Naomi can offer. It is **unilateral commitment** to love and be loyal to her mother-in-law to the extent that she is willing to give up her native faith, an almost unheard of thing in these times, and worship Naomi’s God.

What about marriage? How on earth can marriage be unilateral? Does only one person commit in a marriage?

Actually yes.

Marriage is not a contract. A contract is conditional. A contract says, in effect 'If you do this, then I will do that... **but only if you do this.**' 'If you don't do this that there is no onus on me to do that... and so [the assumption usually is] **I won't do that!**'

We see this in the Christian marriage vows – at least the traditional ones.

The husband will usually say something like...

"In the presence of our families and friends and before God, I, [husband] take you [wife] to be my lawful wedded wife. To have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health. To love, honour and cherish, as long as we both shall live. I pray that God will give me the grace to carry out these vows I make to you.

Do you notice how unconditional this is? It's not **if things get worse then I'm out of here!** Or, **if you don't keep me in the manner I am used to then I out of here.** Or **if you get sick then I'm out of here!**

No, this is, **I will do these things no matter what! I... will... love... you!** And this friends is how God is towards us. No matter what He is committed to us, to the end, for our good, that we might be redeemed.

This is, of course, finally and fully captured in the Cross. The Cross is the great icon of the covenantal nature of God's commitment to us. How far will God go to love us? The answer is, God will go to the Cross – God will die on the Cross – God will suffer the most ignominious degrading and painful death... **for you and I!**

One of the notions contained in the word '**cleave**' is that of strength. When we cleave to another we hold on tightly, the bond is strong, the unity is tight! But where does this strength lie? Does it lie in our strength? Does it lie in our **deal – in the water-tightness of our contract?** No. The strength lies in the commitment of the other.

Only when we can rely on the other to fulfil their commitment can we know true strength and true security in the relationship. Only as the other truly fulfils the most difficult aspect of their part in the covenant will we know its strength.

And this is what we find in God's love. We find a God who is so committed to us that He has died to make that real and that death is a guarantee that God will never give up on us. God is committed to us through a covenant which guarantees His love.

In marriage we ask each other to commit to us in much the same way by asking each other to make **unilateral declarations**.

'I Richard Dawson, take you, Frances Broad, to be my lawfully wedded wife... to have and to hold, from this day forth, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love honour and cherish as long as we both shall live **and** (and here's where the

covenant of marriage differs ever so slightly from the covenant God makes with us, listen for it...) **and I pray that God will give me the grace to carry out these vows I make to you.'**

How can I, a pathetic example of the human race, possibly promise all that. You know I think this is where the realism of men really comes to the fore. Most men look at these promises and something inside them goes **'I just don't know if I can promise that!!! I don't know if I can do that!'** And you know what? They're probably right. They probably can't.

But in and with God we can. Marriage is possible with God's help. With God's help we can say to our spouse, darling this is how I want to be. I declare it now before all these people and I promise to live this way for the rest of our natural lives... with...God's...help!

We know how strong God's love is. Christ died to forever demonstrate this. We know that God's covenant with us will not fail. **His cleaving** is what we need to become and be Christian. **His strength** is what makes his covenant with us so wonderful. As St Paul says, ¹²"Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, **because Christ Jesus has made me his own.**" (Phil 13¹²)

In the spiritual life this cleaving and the strength of it is so important because this is what guarantees the relationship. In our own relationships, as with marriage, we need to **import this strength** by bringing God into every relationship and allowing God's strength, wisdom and spirit to **lend us His power.** This is

precisely what the marriage covenant as it was cast in those old vows did. It said, in effect, I will love you always – **with God's help!** The strength **comes from God's side** and when we finally get this into our thick heads we will have the assurance to go on; to get past our failures and to press on as Paul says.

The great problem in our own culture and throughout the Western world is not so much unbelief but the growth of an inordinate belief in ourselves and arbiters of our own righteousness. We believe for some reason that we can do it all in our own strength. That we don't have to confess our weakness and need and it seems to me that the richer we have become the easier it has been to cling to **self-belief!**

In the spiritual as well as in the earthly we must learn to cleave to the other – we must import God's unconditional decision to love the other and only as we do this will we be able to express the golden rule which is to love others as we ourselves would like to be loved. We who were enemies of God are loved by this same God. Now it is our turn. We must love our enemies.

At the height of the communist era in Europe in the communist East German lived a man who tried eight times to get his children into university. Eight times the Ministry of Education in East Germany said no to Uwe Holmer's children when they each tried to enroll at the university in East Berlin. The Ministry of Education doesn't usually give reasons for its rejection of applications for enrollment. But in this case the reason wasn't hard to guess. Uwe Holmer, the father of the eight applicants,

was a Lutheran pastor at Lobetal, a suburb of East Berlin. For 26 years the Ministry of Education was headed by Margot Honecker, wife of East Germany's premier, Erich Honecker.

Finally, on November 9th 1989 the Berlin wall cracked and Honecker and his wife were unceremoniously dismissed from office. He was indicted for criminal activities during his tenure as premier. At the end of January the following year the Honeckers were evicted from their luxurious palace in Vandlitz, an exclusive suburb of palatial homes reserved for the VIPs in the party. They suddenly found themselves friendless, without resources, and with no place to go. None of their former cronies showed them any mercy at all. No one wanted to identify with the Honeckers.

Enter Uwe Holmer. Remembering the words of Jesus, 'If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also,' Holmer extended an invitation to the Honeckers to stay with his family in the parsonage of the parish church in Lobetal. The Honeckers did not renounce their atheism or profess faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord but at the warm and friendly meal table with the Holmer family around them offering gracious and unjudging company they fold their hands and bow their heads each night when the family prays together.

It is cleaving to God which will give us the strength to cleave to those around us and to love as God loves. Who are the enemies God would have us love today?