I have worked on this sermon with my wife who ruled out all my opening jokes about wifely stereotypes and instead suggested I start with the woman who said – “I took my husband for better or worse but I discovered he was worse than I took him for.”

But as well as the humour, we live in a time when marriage is misunderstood, maligned and under attack.

Many couples today cohabit before getting married although research continues to indicate that the marriages of those who don’t live together beforehand last longer. More than 200 times the number of couples divorce today than a century ago, despite there being fewer couples marrying.

England and Wales also now have fewer marriages and more children born out of wedlock each year. Many of the so called cultured despise marriage as an outmoded and unnecessary imposition of religious imperialism.

Many of the young teenagers who go to Coffee Tots in Coventry simply decided to have babies with no thoughts of commitment to the father of their child.

Our politicians are talking about redefining marriage.

Despite all of this, research continues to show marriage as the best unit for family life and that a good marriage is one of the key ingredients for long term happiness.

It seems then an appropriate and good time to see what the bible has to say about this important subject. Today, we look at first principles and in July, we will looks at some of the practical outworking of those principles. The Bible begins and ends with a wedding. Marriage is God’s idea. Obviously it varies from culture to culture but the concept and roots of human marriage are in God’s own action. Therefore what the Bible says about God’s design for marriage is crucial.

The danger may be that some here who are single might say to themselves. This isn’t relevant to me and switch off. Please don’t do that because a right understanding of marriage is important for all of us. Single people cannot live their lives well as singles without a balanced informed view of marriage. If they do not have that, they will either over-desire or under-desire marriage and either of those ways of thinking will distort their lives.

Please turn to our Bible reading – Genesis 2 (page 2 in the cathedral bibles) and the first thing we see is that marriage was God’s idea from the beginning – v18

“Then the Lord God said “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner”

Up to now, everything in creation has been good culminating in 1v31 “God saw everything he had made and indeed, it was very good”

God now sees man’s need for something other than the beauty of creation or the company of animals is needed and so under anaesthetic (v21), God makes v18 “a helper as his partner”

He needs help and support – what one commentator describes as “one who is to be for man the embodiment of inner and outer encouragement”.
The word for partner means “opposite him or over against him” – different from man but complementary to him.

God is the one who introduces the woman to Adam and Adam’s reaction is to break into the first poetry ever recorded – v23

“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” in other words
“Wow – this is what I wanted/needed!”

V 24 then is the first description of marriage:

“Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh”

This is a key verse for our understanding of marriage.
The NT frequently refers to it.
When questioned about divorce, this is the verse Jesus goes to.
So let’s look at it more closely.

**Three elements stand out:**

**1. Leaving**

Leaving is a key element of marriage.

There is a leaving the former family unit – a going away from father and mother.
This may or may not be a physical reality but certainly it is both emotionally and psychologically.

Up until now, each has had a first loyalty to honouring their parents.
Now it will be to honour the spouse first and foremost.

This is an extraordinary statement in its context.
For us in the 21st century who pay scant regard to our parents’ opinions this seems rather a minor point.

But to the Israelite it was revolutionary and shows the profound effect that marriage has on all our relationships.

It’s an important aspect in marriage today.
I think of one couple where both parents were dominant and wouldn’t let go.
The husband also constantly referred back to his mother.

You may have been married for years. It’s still a question to consider.
Do you need to work at your “leaving element”?

**2. Cleaving**

I’ve chosen the old fashioned word – “cleave” because NRSV “cling to” doesn’t do justice to the word.

The Hebrew word dabaq implies a relationship of passion – of strong, deeply felt attraction.

The Bible delights in sex recognising it as one of God’s great gifts.
The Song of Solomon rejoices in the delights of marital intimacy and Proverbs is full of advice on sex – no prudery here.

But as well as the bonding through the sexual union there is also here an idea of permanence in cleaving.

This is not a relationship to be broken.
The relationship with parents has been loosened but that is in order to tie a still tighter bond between husband and wife.
The word “cleave” tells us this bond should be deep and lasting.
3. One flesh – v24 again

“Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh”

Leaving and cleaving are both active verbs – things that they do.

“Becoming one flesh” is not an active concept.
It is not something a couple can or should do.

The verb is passive.
It is something that God does to them.

Through marriage a new unit is formed.
Two become one.

That is why divorce and separation are so painful to God – it is tearing apart that which he has made one. That pain of divorce is often so much more, far reaching and longer lasting than couples anticipate.

These are the key elements of marriage and the factors that lead the author Christopher Ash to his helpful definition of marriage

“Marriage is
The voluntary sexual and public social union
Of one man and one woman
From different families”

Each of those adjectives is important.

Voluntary – not forced.
Sexual – intercourse is a key element.
Public – this is not something that can be done in private – although a large, lavish and hugely expensive wedding is not necessary!

The wonderful result is that through this leaving cleaving and becoming one, the man and woman enjoy intimacy without embarrassment – v25

“And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed”.

Not surprisingly, this was one of the casualties of the Fall and sexual shame, power games and misuse of sex have been at work ever since.

Now let me summarise where we have got to.
I hope we are beginning to re-establish the high view of marriage that the Bible gives us.

Marriage is good.
Sex is good.
Both Marriage and sex were God’s idea.

However we need to be careful here not to fall into a trap.

That is that marriage is the “b all and end all”;
That whatever else happens, I must find a marriage partner and all will be well.
That is to turn marriage into an idol and all idols are not only misleading – they are destructive.

Marriage, even a very good marriage, can never satisfy the void in our souls for God.
Only God can do that.
No one individual can meet all our needs. That’s why we all need friends and all need God.

Another trap that the enemy uses is to take this high view and use it as a stick to beat up people whose marriage fails. Obviously divorce is sad but it is not the unforgiveable sin. If you are divorced or separated today, know that God loves you just as much as loves everyone else.

Marriage points us to the real marriage that our souls need and the real family our hearts were made for.

Moreover, if the bible has a high view of marriage, it has just as high a view of singleness.

Jesus was single and the most fulfilled man there ever was. Paul was probably single. He realised the value and opportunities of singleness and stressed its advantages in more than one of his letters.

As a result of this revolutionary attitude, the early church did not pressure people to marry and institutionally supported poor widows so they didn’t have to remarry.

If you are single today, rejoice in the freedom that gives you to serve God but be informed about marriage so that you know what to look for, what to avoid and what to expect. Consider how you can help and encourage those who are married.

If you are married today, give thanks for God’s gift of a partner but likewise be informed of your duties and responsibilities and invest in your marriage. At the same time, seek to welcome and care for those who are single.

Next time, we will look at the key NT passage on how marriage is meant to work in practice in Ephesians 5.