

## Medicine of the person :“Abiding relationships and health”

### The changing face of family relationships

Relationships between men and women, and indeed between those of the same gender, have always fascinated people. Shelves in bookshops and magazine racks show the strength of preoccupation with these relationships. My aim in this opening address is to help to set the scene for this meeting by looking in turn at the past, the present and the future of couple relationships. I do so as someone who has worked as a relationship counsellor with the secular organisation called Relate and also within the churches, particularly with clergy and their partners. My experience is entirely from within this country though I'm sure many of the issues I raise will be similar to those you experience wherever you live.

46 years ago, when I married, my female friends and I thought we knew what marriage was. We'd each hoped that we would meet a man to whom we would become engaged, then get married, then have sex and then have children. We expected our marriage to last for life. If we were active Christians, as I was, we knew that this was expected by the church. We also knew that sex before marriage was disapproved of by both Church and society. This was a hard one as sex was not on the agenda in schools, let alone in church, and we were left to share information between ourselves. The overriding thing that helped us to stick to no sex was that none of us wanted a child outside marriage and none of us had access to contraception. So there was plenty of fear and guilt around.

Where did all this come from and what status does marriage have now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

In the words of Professor Carol Smart, Director of the Centre for Research on Family, Kinship and Childhood at the University of Leeds, "It is time we injected a sense of history into popular and political debate on marriage and the family so that we are not always bounced into an inferential framework that assumes everything is getting worse and that if only we could recapture selected elements of the past everything would be fine again." So I turn very briefly to the history of marriage and other abiding relationships in England.

Until the 1750s marriage was usually a private matter between two individuals and their kin. A mere agreement to marry, made in the presence of two witnesses and supplemented by cohabitation, was regarded as a valid marriage, though contrary to church law. Indeed, Henry Swinburne, a senior ecclesiastical lawyer, wrote in 1686 that "Albeit there be no witnesses of the contract, yet the parties having verily (though secretly) contracted matrimony, they are very man and wife before God".

The legal situation changed in 1753, when Parliament passed a Marriage Act which took control over marriage from the hands of individuals and vested it in the Church of England. Except for Jews, this Act laid down that all marriages should be held in Anglican places of worship and be conducted by their clergy. A further Act of Parliament in 1836 legalised marriages in other churches, and also marriages without church involvement.

The 1753 Act did not deter a large part of the population (particularly the less affluent) from making marriages in their own way. In a study of marriage at this time, Lawrence Stone wrote that " By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century consummation and conception normally preceded – and indeed precipitated – marriage, as shown by the fact that a third of all brides were pregnant on their wedding-day, and over half of all first births were conceived out of wedlock." Many of these pregnancies resulted from partnerships which were popularly seen as "marriages in the sight of God" and were "clearly widely accepted among the lower sort ... as a moral justification for

starting sexual relations, on the assumption, usually justified, that the man would marry the woman if and when she became pregnant". But even in this sector of society, premarital sexual relations became less acceptable during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and remained so until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Since then, the frequency of cohabitation and childbearing outside marriage has increased dramatically. Thus, among women marrying for the first time, the proportion who had cohabited before marriage rose from 6% in the late 1960s to 70% in the 1990s. The proportion of children born to unmarried parents rose from about 10% in 1977 to over 40% in 2002, and most of this increase seems to be secondary to the growth in frequency of cohabitation. In 2002 nearly 64% of all live births outside marriage were jointly registered by parents living at the same address; more than twice the proportion in 1986.

Like other countries, we have also experienced vast changes in the ease and frequency of divorce. Until 1857, although there were church courts which could grant a decree of judicial separation, an absolute divorce could only be granted by an Act of Parliament – a highly costly procedure for the person seeking a divorce. Such divorces were very few – an average of less than two a year between 1800 and 1850.

In 1857, a Matrimonial Causes Act transferred the granting of divorces and judicial separations to the secular law courts. Under this Act, divorces could only be granted if one marriage partner had committed a "matrimonial wrong" against the other. For this purpose, adultery was defined as a "matrimonial wrong" in the 1857 Act, and desertion, cruelty and prolonged incurable mental disorder were added by later legislation. Another change came with the Divorce Reform Act of 1969 and subsequent legislation which abandoned "matrimonial wrongs" as grounds for divorce in favour of "irretrievable breakdown of marriage".

Throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the annual number of divorces in England and Wales remained below a thousand, but the figure rose steeply during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and stood at nearly 144 thousand in 2001 (when there were nearly 250 thousand marriages). One reason for this increase is of course that in the past couples whose marriages broke down were more likely to cope by methods other than divorce. For example, Samantha Callan has described how the very poor followed folk customs for "unmarrying" and then taking a new partner. "Such folk customs included wife sales in local markets" (which Thomas Hardy described in 'The Mayor of Casterbridge'). "In more anonymous settings such as large towns" people changed their partners "without recourse to ritual".

This historical review would be incomplete if I did not briefly mention the change in the law and in public opinion on sexual relationships between people of the same gender. These were punishable by imprisonment until 1967, when the Sexual Offences Act legalised them. They are now widely though by no means universally accepted, and the Government has recently given various rights to gay and lesbian couples that used to apply only to married couples.

We can see from all this that the pattern of marriage and other abiding relationships in Britain has changed dramatically and continues to change. In particular, over the last few decades it has become far more common and socially acceptable for people to live together in committed sexual relationships without having formally married. Many of you will have witnessed similar trends in other countries. But this should not blind us to the evidence that there have also been other times in history when cohabitation has been more widely practised and accepted than it was in the society into which most of us were born.

To bring the recent demographic trends to life, let me tell you how these changes have

impacted on me. When I became a wife in 1959, I and those who knew me saw my status as having permanently altered. I had become a married woman till parted from my husband by death. One generation later the expectations were different. My husband and I have 4 children; all born after our marriage. Our first born, a daughter, married without having cohabited with her fiancé first, and had 3 children. The second born, a son, lived with his fiancé, soon married, and had 1 child. Six years after marrying, he and his wife divorced. A few years after that he met his present partner and they have 3 children. His ex-wife had left him for another man, by whom she has had 2 more children. So our son's first child has 5 half brothers and sisters. Our third child, a daughter, had a son when she was 19 as a result of a relationship where there was no long term commitment. Seven years later she met and married another man and they had a daughter; and her husband adopted her son. Our fourth child, a son, lived with his long term girl friend for about three years before having the first of three children. When the eldest was 6 they got married.

In other words, only five of our twelve grandchildren were born to parents who were married at the time; and one of those five is the child of a marriage that ended in divorce. Of the other seven, one was born as a result of a short-term relationship; three have parents who are in a very committed relationship, although not married; and the parents of the other three are now married. The eldest of those three said to a friend of mine two days before the wedding of her parents, "Mummy and Daddy are getting married on Saturday. It's a bit different because we've already been born". But is this actually "a bit different" to-day? "A bit different" from the traditional way of doing things, yes. But hardly different enough to be remarkable any more, given the huge range of differences in attitude towards marriage that we are experiencing today.

I guess many of you here have similar stories which show the enormous changes which have taken place in the pattern of marriage and family life and in society's acceptance of partnerships outside marriage. There has been less acceptance of change within the faith communities in Britain; but even here, change is creeping in.

So what are we to make of the situation in which our society finds itself today as a result of these changes? One aspect of the changes is that with the increased availability and frequency of divorce there has come a tendency for marriage to be seen as a contract which can be set aside rather than as an irrevocable commitment. The image of marriage as a life-long commitment has become an ideal instead of the norm. Another change is that it is no longer usual for women to pledge obedience to men when they marry. They expect to be treated as equal partners by their husbands. In general, both sexes expect more of the marriage relationship in terms of personal fulfilment, emotional security and sexual satisfaction. Because more emphasis is currently placed on the marriage relationship than on marriage as an institution, it seems to be generally accepted that the institution is no longer potent enough to oblige a couple to remain together once they have decided that the relationship has ceased to make them happy.

How are men and women relating to all these changes and in particular to the speed with which the changes are happening? Let me first say a little about the influence of gender on the impact of these changes, and then talk about the common severe problems in marriage today.

So far as gender differences are concerned, the lives of many men continue to be dominated by their jobs. The view of these men is that domestic life is a place to come home to, a comfortable base where they can expect to be well cared for. But they can still feel the home to be female territory, both uninteresting and bewildering. On the other hand many women are

primarily home-centred even when they work outside the home. They often choose jobs that fit in with their household responsibilities. Both sexes often carry a desire for an equal and sharing relationship. But there continue to be considerable differences between the sexes in society, so it is hardly surprising that this is reflected in marriage. Society continues to be male dominated. Men and women are different! They appear to be united in marriage because they have a purpose in common. The traditional institution of marriage was oppressive for women because it entailed the absorption of the female by the male. In the current emphasis on the relationship, both partners can feel oppressed by an ideology which fails to understand and appreciate the vitality and complexity of their differences. A survey of young people in Britain carried out in 2003 shows that whilst some ideas about family life stay the same, others are changing. The survey found that girls continue to be less traditional than boys in their approach to gender roles. More girls than boys thought that one parent could bring up a child as well as two parents.

Turning now to the commonest severe problems in marriage today, here is a list of the top ten issues that couples identify as causing the most distress in their partnerships when they come to Relate (the foremost relationship counselling organisation in the UK). First, breakdown in communication. Women often tell us, "My partner doesn't want to talk about how I feel, he switches off." Men can feel the same way or say that they don't understand why their partner wants to talk endlessly about feelings. "He won't listen to me" is the phrase that sums up the frustration in a relationship where problems are never resolved and resentments fester. Second, arguments. Some couples seem to thrive on lively arguments, but constant battles can tear a relationship apart. "You don't support me" and "You don't understand me" are common themes in arguments between couples. Third, affairs. A high percentage of couples who come for relationship counselling have had affairs. Often they don't lead to the end of the relationship, but they are usually the symptom of a relationship that's breaking down because other problems haven't been tackled. Some people look for constant affairs to convince themselves that they are still attractive. Fourth, sexual problems. This can be an area where some couples find it hard to communicate with each other and a small difficulty turns into a major problem over time. Other couples are facing major issues like when one of them has been sexually abused as a child. Fifth, money problems. Personal debt is increasing in this country. It puts a relationship under huge pressure. Sixth, domestic violence. This can be physical, verbal and/or emotional. Seventh, addiction. This can take many forms – obsessive gambling, drug dependency, alcoholism etc. Eighth, second or subsequent marriages. A second marriage may seem like the perfect answer to the pain of divorce, but it can throw up many problems. Conflict with stepchildren is the most common along with unresolved feelings of anger or guilt. Ninth, depression. Living with depression or with a seriously depressed partner can be a cause of immense stress. Tenth, the ending of the relationship. Facing the reality of when a relationship is over is like accepting a bereavement. Couples experience shock, denial, anger and maybe depression. Those who have children have to work out their ongoing parenting relationship at the same time as dealing with their own feelings. A more recent and increasingly common issue that brings couples for counselling is the Internet. Men and women complain of becoming Internet widows or widowers after being left to sit alone as a partner spends hours at the computer messaging strangers in chat rooms or downloading music or games. Also, some internet sites have enabled people to reignite old passions and revive school romances. Internet pornography and cybersex are another threat to partner harmony. So much for the problems that confront married couples today. Let me end by reflecting on the future of marital and other couple relationships. As the control of marriage has moved away

from the Church to the State, it has been argued that Christian principles of marriage should apply only to those individuals whose faith and conscience direct them to live that way. People can no longer be expected to get married because it is the right thing to do. If marriage is to continue to be seen as important in our society we have to be able to justify it as an institution which enriches human life and not because of any moral imperative.

So does the institution of marriage as we know it have a future? If frequency of occurrence is any guide, statistical evidence suggests that it does. Forecasts from present trends suggest that the vast majority of men and women marry at some time in their lives, many more than once. Why is this so? 15 years ago Penny Mansfield and Jean Collard studied the relationship of 65 couples. Their findings remain relevant to-day. It seems that marriage is still seen as the thing to do. It is following an expected tradition. Marriage symbolises the powerful tradition of both family life and the couple's own individual families. For some it is also part of their faith tradition. For those who are marrying for the second or subsequent time, it shows the seriousness of their commitment to each other. Marriage also marks out boundaries in people's lives which gives them containment, security and a measure of certainty. Marriage hold a promise of 'home' in both a physical and an emotional sense. The marriage contract can feel to offer a more stable financial future. It remains for many a more accepted context for having children. Marriage also provides a point of departure from the past and defines the shape of the future.

However, we can expect a further increase in the number of couples who choose not to marry – couples who feel so bound together by their relationship alone that they have no need of a public commitment . To them the institution of marriage is an irrelevance. The commitment to one another of such a couple, whether heterosexual or homosexual, can be as deep as a married couple's commitment. This challenges us to think whether the really important thing to ask about any partnership is not whether the couple have gone through a form of marriage, but whether they have entered upon an exclusive commitment to one another which is meant to last. To put it theologically, may it be the existence of such a commitment rather than of a legal contract of marriage that makes a couple married in the eyes of God? I want to challenge us to think as to whether we worry too much about the legal aspects and too little about what makes a relationship work and what makes it break down. Should we be more concerned about actual relationships than about legal status? Should both the Churches and the State be commending and supporting all partnerships of respect, trust, faithfulness and love? What would this mean for children, the extended family and society? I leave you with these questions.

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