

## Sermon Archive 592

Sunday 28 June, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections on UNUDHR - Article 16

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



### **Reflection:** Four different roads to "I do" or "I don't"

Here are four thoughts about marriage - and whether, OR NOT, we, as Western Protestants of the Twenty-first Century, have the comfy chair of believing that marriage belongs entirely to us - and is just a Christian cultural thing.

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My mother lives in Tāmaki Makaurau. Before her retirement, she worked as a radiographer in a private Xray practice. One of the radiologists for whom she worked came from India. The radiologist, same generation as my mother, was married to a man whom she was given through a traditional arranged marriage process. She didn't choose her husband. She was not led to him by her own sense of love and miracle. He was found **for** her, by parents, aunts, uncles, a wider group who professed to know what was wise. Mum's radiologist said to her that, while it was awkward to begin with, to be given to someone she didn't know, she now (after many years of marriage) loves her husband very deeply. She appreciates things in him that she might have not looked for. While, in Aotearoa, the practice of arrangement is considered "on the cultural edge", she is very grateful for how it worked for her.

Still up in Tāmaki Makaurau, the people living next door to my mother also come from India. In a conversation over the fence, Mum learned that they are planning a trip back to India. Something in the conversation led Mum to wonder whether the purpose of the trip was to make connections for their eldest daughter, who might be considered now to be of marriageable age. Mum wonders whether the trip might be for the purpose of introducing a Kiwi Indian girl to an Indian Indian boy.

I said to Mum "no, I think you're on a flight of fantasy there. Arranged marriage is something that happened in your generation. Not now, though. I dismissed my mother as someone caught in a cultural time warp. Then I did some research. Seemingly, in India, today, 90% of marriages still are arranged. Research also reveals that divorce rates in India are among the lowest in the world - about 1%. Maybe 1% speaks to the wisdom of Indian practice. Or maybe it speaks from a

culture where divorce is considered so shameful that spouses just hang on in there while their hearts and hopes die. That's a harder metric to measure.

Here's a second thought. We sometimes hear about the Biblical model of marriage. One man and one woman, led to each other by the goodness of God, to love the revealed and given other person faithfully, and beautifully - with gratitude. "Today, I take you to be my husband, my wife - to have and to hold from this time forth, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness or in health, to love, honour and cherish, for as long as we both shall live."

It's a beautiful vision. But it's not the only model in the Bible. Our first reading today will explore one of the other Biblical versions - and the traps that lie in the institution. We note that Abraham, the father of the three Abrahamic faiths, had a wife, but also a concubine - and that his grandson had twelve wives. It's all Biblical - so we need to think carefully.

Here's a third thought. A long-standing friend of mine, a male of deep Christian faith, has been living for decades now in an loving, exclusive, sexual relationship with another man. It was only last year that I asked him if they were married. He told me that they weren't - because his religious view is that marriage is between a man and a woman. He told me that some of his rainbow friends found his position utterly mad. Surely as a rainbow person, he would adopt a rainbow inclusive position. He disagrees - and remains unmarried to the man he loves. I think I respect his position. Law allows for him to marry, but he chooses not to take that freedom for himself. It's *his* choice. I, as a Presbyterian minister, am prohibited by church legislation from presiding at his marriage. For today, concerning my response to that, I make no comment. You'll have to ask me later.

Here's a fourth thought. The late Reverend Doctor Ken Booth, Anglican priest, part of our community here at Knox for years, and someone I admired, often said that he did not "marry people". All he did was preside at occasions where people married each other. (I take you to be my husband. I take you to be my wife.) **People** do the marrying - and sometimes the church has an opportunity to rejoice with them as they do it.

-ooOoo-

It's clear to me that there are many forms of marriage in the world, many ways that people do it. It's culturally and historically diverse. I think that's OK. It's clear to me also that in each and any of the models, there is room for people to flourish, but also to suffer. And in terms of the suffering, there are real things from which people need to be protected - and about which our Christian faith ought to mobilise concern and action. The United Nations releases Article 16 - freedom to marry, and not to marry. Does God's Spirit inhabit the rights?

**The First Lesson:** Genesis 21: 8-14

**Reflection:** Institutions and victims

This story is unfolding before the giving of the Law (the law that came to the Bible people though Moses), so there's not yet any detailed description of how people ought to live - other than that they ought to be listening for the voice of God and aiming to be better than the people of Noah's generation. There's certainly no law about marriage. Abraham, the father of faith, is married to Sarah. One of the goals (or should you say responsibilities) of their marriage is that they ought to be fruitful and multiply. Alas, for them, this is just not happening. Even though they have this odd spiritual experience in the form of a promise (that their descendants shall be numerous as the stars in the sky), the sky of their marriage is proving pretty cloudy. No descendant is materialising.

So, into their model of marriage, is drawn Hagar - the servant of the wife in the marriage. There be some elasticity here! A few generations later, that elasticity will present in the one-man-many-wives model. But for now, the limitations of **this** marriage (concerning being fruitful and multiplying) are met by Hagar being impregnated by Abraham. As a slave, she probably has little say.

Next step: she gives birth, and secures a future for Abraham's line.

Next step: Sarah, the wife, gives birth to a son, and fears for his inheritance - given the existence of this bastard child to another woman.

Next step: Hagar and the boy Ishmael are thrown out into the wilderness. They are cut off from the family - because, you know, the family has family lines to protect - and jealousies and insecurities. Don't we all have insecurities?

This model of marriage, with its responsibilities and social pressures, with the ways it draws people into attending to the pressures, leaves a woman and her child abandoned in the desert. There are victims here.

Meanwhile, in our day, somewhere in our world, a twelve year old girl is given to a forty year old man. In **our** country, she is considered still to be a child. She ought not to be subject to sexual engagement. She might have dreams for other things. She might just want to be a child (as she is a child). Yet, she has no say. Her culture has decided that now is the time for her to conform. So she does. She becomes a married person, and cries.

There are many models of marriage in our world. Human beings have the right to marry - and to not marry. Does God's Spirit inhabit the rights?

**Music for Reflection**

**The Gospel Lesson:** Matthew 22: 23-33

**Reflection:** Don't you be using marriage as a weapon

By the time that Jesus began his ministry, it was fairly normal among the common people of Israel, for marriage to be between one man and one woman. Monogamy was the thing. And as with regular cultural things, there's a degree of power to the norm, or social persuasiveness to it. If everyone's confirming to it, then it *is* powerful.

Into this power steps a group of people trying to trap Jesus into saying something silly about heaven.

"There's this woman", they say, "who's been married to many men - totally caught up in the institution of marriage to one man at a time. When she gets to heaven, whose wife is she going to be?"

Later, Jesus is going to be described as the bridegroom, whose beloved bride is the church. Marriage, for his people, was a rich metaphor for how God is devoted to the world. But here, he has no truck at all with people forcing him into describing the reign of God along the lines of a woman who needs to be married to one, rather than to another. "That's not how it works in heaven", he says.

I suspect, had the question been put to him in a less hostile way, he might have answered it differently. What we have *here* is him pushing back against a group of people who are using a cultural norm about how people love one another as a weapon.

"Don't you bring marriage to me as a weapon", he says. Let's talk instead about how the God of love gives life to a messy world of love and not-love, and mistake, regret, and home and fulfilment. Marriage must not be used as a power-play.

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It seems to me that marriage is a wonderful gift. It comes to different people differently - and to many people it does not come. It didn't come to Jesus. The ideal is that within it, people flourish - as many do. In other contexts people suffer within it, and there are times to protect people from it.

Maybe the question is "where is the Spirit of God within it?" How does life flow from it? How do we need to press the edges of our narrow thinking about it? Where is the love of God to be found sown in it? We have the right to marry, and to not marry. A moment of quiet.

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