

- 18 'Gerontion' 2-6.
- 19 'The Waste Land' 70.
- 20 'Baudelaire' *Selected Essays* p423. In the same paragraph, Eliot talks of Baudelaire's *ennui* as 'a true form of *acedia*, arising from the unsuccessful struggle towards the spiritual life.'
- 21 'Gerontion' 7-12.
- 22 T.S. Eliot, *Anti-Semitism and Literary Form*, Ch. 2.
- 23 Pope, 'Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot' 202.
- 24 Sermon 'Of the Nativitie', Christmas 1618 Lancelot Andrewes, *Sermons*, Ed. Storey, p 85.
- 25 'Gerontion' 18-19.
- 26 47.
- 27 21-22.
- 28 25.
- 29 cf. Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet* p 112.
- 30 32-46.
- 31 Cf. Kenner p 108.
- 32 112.
- 33 Kenner *Ibid.*
- 34 Yeats, 'The Second Coming' concluding lines.
- 35 V iii 149-53.
- 36 53-9.
- 37 66-70.
- 38 'Little Gidding' II.23 Pope, 'Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot' 202.

Christian Ministry and Christian People Some Thoughts on Sacramental Theology

Natalie K. Watson

The title of this article could be considered misleading in many ways. It does not at first sight disclose what I am actually writing about, i.e. marriage and ordination as sacraments. It also makes one wonder whether the two parts of the title connected with the conjunction 'and' actually present an alternative: i.e. does Christian ministry refer to those in specific or ordained ministry while marriage refers to those who are not in Christian ministry? Or have they got more in common than one would expect? Maybe this article ought to be more aptly named: 'sacraments of commitment and commission' as that briefly describes

what marriage and ordination are about. Yet there are other common aspects which shed an interesting light on the topic. Both are rites which put one way of life, one form of commitment over many others. The idea of sacramental marriage makes one wonder why in an age of pluralism and plurality the church decides to bless one form of relationship, but not many possible others. The publication of John Boswell's contentious book *The Marriage of Likeness*¹ as well as the contemporary debates about blessings of same-sex relationships are signs of this phenomenon as is the question of single people whether their form of life is less valid than that of married couples. The debate over the distinction between clergy and laity makes one wonder whether the church does not support a system of privilege and expertise which devalues the work of those who do not participate in this form of privilege.

Both marriage and ordination are in a sense 'rites of passage' from one state of life to another, 'rites of passage' and commissioning to something that is beyond the capacity of the individual human being and involves more than the individual human being. It is a commitment to something that was there before the individual human being was and is essentially much wider than the visible reality of what an individual or perhaps two individuals can perceive. Interestingly enough both the service for 'The Ordering of Priests' and for 'The Solemnisation of Matrimony' begin with the question whether anyone present knows about any impediment why those presented for ordination or marriage should not be ordained or married. This suggests that both marriage and ordination are viewed as commitments as well as commissionings to something that is more than a profession. They are indeed lifelong forms of life and service.

Another issue that is equally relevant to both marriage and ordination likewise is the fact that, although the church provides ritual and support at the beginning of a promising commitment, it remains rather quiet in case the commitment fails or ends. That does not mean that the churches do not know or acknowledge the fact that marriages do end or indeed fail. The Roman Catholic Church provides the option of an annulment of a marriage, the Orthodox Church claims that the church has the power both to bind and to loose and therefore allows divorce and indeed remarriage and there is after all a history of those who have renounced marriage commitments to enter a monastery or a convent. Yet, it appears that these are perceived in legal rather than in theological or even liturgical terms. While the Church of England has at times been frightfully vocal about the issue of the remarriage or not-remarriage of divorcees, there are so far only limited and certainly not authorised attempts at rites for the end of a marriage commitment for those who

might be an even greater need of the church's prayer and consolation than those facing the yet unknown reality of married life. What is at issue here and is in fact practised in a number of parishes around the country is not a celebration of the end of a marriage, a wedding in reverse, but a release from life vows which partners are no longer able to keep as well as the affirmation of forgiveness as well as of those things that were good in a marriage. Such a rite could be part of a necessary process of grieving and new beginnings. In a similar way the experiences of those leaving the priesthood or seminary training are rather those of silent embarrassment and as a result a feeling of failure and/or relief rather than a release from vows which were obviously not for them. With regard to both we therefore see a lack of awareness of a God who is present in all parts of the journeys of people's lives.

On the historical side, both sacraments of marriage and ordination share that even though the entities they refer to have somehow always been there in the Christian church, their more precise nature as sacraments and sacramental rites came into being relatively late in the history of the church. We can therefore look at both sacraments from two angles: understanding them through the rites that lead to them and understanding them from the perspective of the state of life into which they lead.

Marriage came to be defined as one of the sacraments in the 12th century, though not without difficulty. It could after all not be seen as instituted by Christ as it had though in a looser form than we assume today existed long before Christ. Also it involved financial arrangements as well as sexual intercourse, both of which were difficult to conceive as being part of a sacramental theology. There is a lot of convoluted symbolism involved: the Christian tradition throughout favours one particular form of heterosexual relationship which is understood as necessary for human reproduction and after all, and that may count in its favour, models itself on the fundamental relationship of all, that of Christ and the church. (A polemically inclined critic may want to enter into discussion of ontological priority of chicken or egg.) Yet if we turn round and view this kind of symbolism from a different perspective, it means that the priest, like Christ, is married to the church and therefore from a sociological perspective married to his work which, as the reality of many clergy marriages suggests, does not leave much time for wife and family anyway.

I want to develop an understanding of marriage and ordination as sacraments and therefore as symbols of what the church is, i.e. of the sacramental rites of marriage and ordination as celebrations in which the reality of the intersection between Christ, the Church and the human beings involved is made present. It is this that makes Christian

sacramental marriage different from marriages that are perceived as merely defining a legal relationship. One might then indeed ask with many of our contemporaries: what difference does a piece of paper make? And this leads to the question: what, if they do, does this say about those who do not participate in this particular form of sacramental reality or more importantly those who by choice, vocation or sexual orientation participate in alternative forms of life? Are they excluded from the church or at least its blessing or should the church consider developing alternative forms of sacramental blessing as it has done at least on its fringes? And could the sacramental nature of the existing rites be extended to other forms of life or ministry? Or do marriage and ordained ministry contain elements of truth about the Christian church and/or human relationships that would not be expressed in any other way?

There are obviously aspects which have been changed over time or have appeared to be dated or bound by circumstances of time and context. The bride is no longer given away by her father not does she vow obedience to her husband and the allegiance to the Queen asked of a priest of the Church of England is clearly a feature of the established Church of England and will not be asked of those ordained in the Church in Wales. But what about the more fundamental issues such as heterosexual relationships or the distinction between clergy and laity? How can we distinguish between what is essential, i.e. part of the sacramental reality conveyed and what is not?

Marriage and ordination are obviously no longer alternatives and have not been so for quite some time. Even though the Roman Catholic church still insists on clerical celibacy, the churches in connection with the Reformation did change their attitudes to the marriage of the clergy on the assumption that the clergy are to provide a role model for both church and society. But the marriage of the clergy is not really the issue as such. The question is whether changing patterns of sexuality and the permissibility of a multitude of committed relationships as well as a multitude of different forms of ministry suggests the transformation of sacramentality and symbolism involved or whether a thorough consideration is needed as to what marriage and ordained ministry are and what they are not.

It is characteristic for the sacrament of marriage that the partners give the sacrament to each other which theoretically would not even require the presence of a priest, even though since the Council of Trent the priest's presence is indeed required. Does this mean that what man and wife are making present to each other requires the presence of a man and a woman or would it be something that could also exist between two men or two women or more importantly does it mean that

there are aspects of the sacramental reality of the church which are there for some but not for all as is the case with the ordained ministry. The question is also whether sexuality, be it with regard to its presence, absence or orientation, has so far been given a far too prominent role which enforces the invalidity of any form of relationship for which sexuality might not be an issue. But then does every relationship have to be blessed by the church? The gay and lesbian community is obviously divided over this issue: while some see the fundamental injustice of sacramental marriage being denied to those who are obviously intending a life-long commitment to each other, others view marriage as an institution that has obviously failed in the heterosexual community and is therefore not particularly attractive to those to whom other forms of understanding their relationships and their commitment are open. With regard to priesthood and ordained ministry, traditional models of ministry and the life of a priest are being debated. Our own time has seen fundamental changes such as the vote for women priests and the increase of non-stipendiary ministry as well as the introduction of alternatives to residential training. It will be interesting to see how these actually change the theological understanding of priesthood and vocation itself.

Historical study shows that the church's views on marriage and in fact sexuality have been subject to much change over time. But does that mean that anything goes or that the church should in fact advocate free love? Is marriage and/or ministry an issue where praxis and doctrine have to part or one has to be adjusted to the other or is it on us to explore whether what we call doctrine would give space for many more different forms of praxis than we currently perceive? It has been pointed out that the church's teaching on sexuality and marriage was often that of those who did not experience either: celibate priests. The question would therefore be: would a re-thinking of Christian ministry bring with it a re-thinking of theology and ethics as well as a sacramental praxis on the terms of those who are church: men and women?

Another aspect to be taken into account is the question of who are the people involved in marriage commitment or those who commit themselves to the ordained ministry? It has been pointed out that the church's views on marriage and or celibacy were not so much dependent on the issue of sexuality, but rather dependent on the church's attitude to women. Clerical celibacy was often not seen as a matter of abstinence from sex as such, but as keeping away from the company of women. This year is only the fifth anniversary of the vote for the ordination of women which by no means means that the controversies legal, theological and practical are resolved. And yet there are those who say

that the debate is over now that women are admitted to the priesthood, reducing an obviously theological and essentially ecclesiological debate to matters of legality and carefully avoiding one of the church's most feared enemies: change. With regard to both marriage and ordination, the question is not one of the church going with the flow of contemporary society and in its long accustomed fashion *limping behind* at least fifty years. True development of both doctrine and praxis (and the two contrary to popular opinion are not as separate as one would believe) means the church coming closer to itself, evaluating its own beliefs and practices in dialogue with challenges from within and outside the church. The debate about whether or not the church should extend its sacramental understanding to commitments which are not between a man and a woman and whether the church should provide authorised rites for the release from marriage vows should therefore not be treated as a question of responding to popular demand, but rather as a question of our theology of marriage itself. With regard to the ordination of women for example the debate should not stop as it has done in a number of denominations with women being allowed to do men's things, but the question is: how are women priests going to transform the church by bringing it closer to itself? Is non-stipendiary ministry to be treated as a second rate form of ministry (similar to the distinction between those who are properly getting married in church and those who receive 'just a blessing' after a civil wedding) or does it open up the debate of the theology of priesthood as such?

In the opening passages of this article I mentioned the church's inability to provide support at the end of what was at its beginning meant to be a lifelong commitment. Yet we do notice the church recognising the need to change its policy on divorce and remarriage as the reality of life in the societies we live in presses for it. The question is therefore whether the church's gradual change of policy does not suggest the need of another change of policy which allows the blessing of commitments which are not marriages. What has changed and is changing all the time is the societal context in which married couples begin or are refused to begin a committed relationship sanctioned and blessed by the church. It is important to think of both marriage and ordained ministry not as a static reality, but as a reality which involves people who change. Yet, the question remains, should the church bless any kind of lifestyle which people might chose or should we not rather ask if what defines the essence of sacramental marriage could not also be present in other forms of committed relationship, such as same-sex commitments or even a reconsideration of celibacy as a commitment as binding as marriage. It is here that the differences of the crises both

marriage and ordination face become apparent. My thesis is that while the kind of commitment inherent in sacramental marriage can in fact be found in relationships other than those between husband and wife, the nature of the sacramental priesthood is such that it remains unique. Marriage existed before Christianity and Christians get married according to the customs and rites of the society in which they live, yet in adding a sacramental understanding to marriage the church views a marriage commitment as something that transcends the contingencies of culture and yet remains thoroughly within it. To open up the sacramental character of marriage to other committed relationships would mean to reconsider the role of procreation as one of the purposes of marriage. This, however, is necessary anyway and is reflected in the changes made to the wedding service between the BCP and the ASB. While procreation appears as the supreme cause for marriage in the BCP followed by the avoidance of sin and last not least companionship, this order is inverted in the ASB rite. By far not all heterosexual couples do or want to procreate and marriage is by far not the only setting into which children are born. Can procreation therefore be seen as the purpose of marriage or to other possible commitment the theology of marriage is extended ? The question remains: what is marriage commitment and what is it not?

In a theology that understands the whole of the Christian life as sacramental, Christian marriage symbolises this sacramental reality as participating in the life of Christ, his sacrificial death and his resurrection. The partners relate to each other as Christ relates to the Church and in doing so they embody the reality of the church. The priest in sacramental celebration makes this reality present to the church. A sacramental understanding of Christian marriage views the partners as ministering in a priestly way to each other, participating in the priesthood for each other. The roles of priest and church are not interchangeable, but they are based on a relationship of mutuality in which one cannot be without the other. Yet it is the church which commends the candidate for ordination as marriage is not a private, but a public commitment. Through their nature of being public, the church as the body of Christ in present, past and future confirms both commitment and commission of priestly ministry or marriage to those presented for it. The question at issue with regard to both marriage and ordination as well as possible alternatives or extensions is therefore essentially an ecclesiological one and one of sacramental theology as such.

- 1 John Boswell, *The Marriage of Likeness. Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe* (Harper Collins. 1995).