

From the Friary of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel



Welcome to a very occasional essay on some topical issues.

Today I would like to explore same sex marriage. The Australian Government is holding a national postal ballot on whether the Australian Marriage Act should be changed to allow people of the same sex to marry. Presently the Act only recognises a legal marriage as being between a man and a woman.

Now the caveats. Firstly, what follows will undoubtedly cause some people to accuse me of a variety of things, such as heresy. Others will welcome and support what is written. These reactions do not concern me. Secondly, I am a Christian, hence my views reflect my faith journey. This journey is mine and will not be the same as anyone else. There may be elements of the journey that resonate with people, and there will be parts that do not.

To those who do not like what is written, move on. I am not going to engage in a further conversation defending or justifying my words. My reasons for my view are explained in this document. If you believe I am a heretic, that is your opinion, to which you are perfectly entitled. However, your opinion will not alter my relationship with my Lord and God, even if you believe it should.

To those who like what is written, thank you. But please do not use them to castigate those who do not agree with your view. They have their opinions, as do you, and they are entitled to them. You may not agree with them, but I believe you need to respect them and their different opinion.

Marriage, in my view, is comprised of two quite distinct components, legal/economic and faith. Over time these two have merged into one and have, to large extent become indistinguishable. This is unfortunate. Why? Because by blending them we have made it difficult to “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”¹

As I have already said, I make a very clear distinction about the secular and faith parts of a marriage. Here I deal with the purely secular legal and economic component.

When a couple marry, their legal assets are generally considered to have merged. Thus, the Australian Government’s social welfare department – Centrelink - and finance institutions, will take the separate income of each person and combine them, thereby treating them as one amount. This practice is not faith based, it is a purely legal/economic arrangement. This is a secular process, and so thereby has no consideration of the sex of either person.

¹ Matthew 22: 20-21

In fact, Australian law was altered to address the right of same sex couples.

“The Government's same-sex law reform package passed through Parliament in November 2008. The reform removed discrimination against same-sex de facto couples and their families in areas such as taxation, superannuation, social security and family assistance, the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme Safety Net and the Medicare Safety Net, aged care, veterans' entitlements, immigration, citizenship and child support and family law.”²

It therefore stands to reason, that there is no secular reason why people of the same sex should be prevented from having a ‘legal’ marriage.

This then brings us to the faith portion of a marriage. And as is so often the case in faith based discussions, here is where the topic becomes problematic. There are two opposing views: those who argue same sex couple should be allowed to marry, and those who say they should not.

While there are of course, instances of arranged marriages where the couple do not know each other, generally today marriages are based on the ardent desire of a couple to form a permanent partnership. Accordingly, in the faith portion of a marriage, the couple make their vows to each other, in the presence of God. In the process, they are establishing two covenants. The one with themselves in which they united, become one, and then one with God.

This faith portion of a marriage is conducted in a ceremony as a sacred act. It is one which is influenced, and confirmed, by the faith community in which the couple live. Within this ceremonial context there are traditions, rites and rituals which the religious leader(s) of their faith community use to bless and confirm the sacredness of these covenants. These traditions, rites and rituals will vary from community to community, but all have at their core the importance, sacredness and relevance of the covenants.

Let us now turn to the “no same sex marriage” argument.

The passage from the Christian Bible that is often used in the argument is Matthew 19: 4-6:

⁴ He answered, “Haven’t you read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, ‘For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall join to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh?’ ⁶ So that they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, don’t let man tear apart.”’

There is no point in trying to argue that the passage of scripture does not say what it does. A man and woman marry and become one. It would be foolish to argue it does not say this. However, I believe that the context of Jesus’s statement is about divorce.

² <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programs-services/recognition-of-same-sex-relationships> accessed 9/9/2017

Indeed verse 3 says:

³ Pharisees came to him, testing him, and saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason?"

And in verses 7 to 9 Jesus says:

⁷ They asked him, "Why then did Moses command us to give her a bill of divorce, and divorce her?"

⁸ He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it has not been so. ⁹ I tell you that whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and he who marries her when she is divorced commits adultery."

By simply focusing on verses 4 and 5, I believe that the text is being taken out of its context of the reality of the frailty of human relationships. That said, I understand that there are people who will not move beyond these verses. They will see them as a divine instruction to not permit people of the same sex to have a faith based marriage. Because to allow such a marriage, would, for them, to be contrary to the professed will of God. I have absolutely no doubt that these folks are incredibly genuine and deeply sincere in this belief.

There is of course the other view. In this view, the focus is made on love. The perspective here being that a faith based marriage of a same sex couple unites the two persons as one, based on the love they have for each other. One cannot deny the love, because if one does then one is acting contrary to the teaching about God's love and love of neighbour. So, the union is to be sanctioned.

In Matthew 19:16-19, Jesus tells the rich young man:

¹⁶ Behold, one came to him and said, "Good teacher, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" ¹⁷ He said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but one, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments."

¹⁸ He said to him, "Which ones?" Jesus said, "'You shall not murder.' 'You shall not commit adultery.' 'You shall not steal.' 'You shall not offer false testimony.' ¹⁹ 'Honor your father and mother.' And, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Again in 22:34-40, Matthew records an encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees:

³⁴ But the Pharisees, when they heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, gathered themselves together. ³⁵ One of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, testing him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?"

³⁷ Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the first and great commandment. ³⁹ A second likewise is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

The two verses 19:19 and 22:39 have become known and the "Second Great Commandment". While some may think it is a new commandment, it is not. It is also found in Leviticus 19:18:

¹⁸ "'You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people; but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am Yahweh.'"

Why am I highlighting these passages? Matthew 22:40.

⁴⁰ The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.”

Let's read the whole passage again:

³⁷ Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the first and great commandment. ³⁹ A second likewise is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.”

Put another way, the entire teaching of the Bible is summarised in those forty words.

In 1 John 4.7-21, John says:

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God, and knows God. ⁸ He who doesn't love doesn't know God, for God is love. ⁹ By this God's love was revealed in us, that God has sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God remains in us, and his love has been perfected in us. ¹³ By this we know that we remain in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God remains in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ We know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and he who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him. ¹⁷ In this love has been made perfect among us, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment, because as he is, even so are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear has punishment. He who fears is not made perfect in love. ¹⁹ We love him, because he first loved us. ²⁰ If a man says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who doesn't love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? ²¹ This commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should also love his brother.

So, what am I proposing here?

Simply put, if we are to love our neighbour as ourselves, then we cannot ignore them. Indeed, we cannot exclude them from a ceremony which denies them their ability to establish covenants expressing their love. To do so, is to “hate” them; and that in turn goes against the two Greatest Commandments. Therefore, the sanctification of the faith based portion of a marriage should be conducted when the love and commitment of the couple is plainly evident. It cannot be denied to them, simply because of their sex.

Which then brings us back to our opening statements, The Australian Government's Same Sex Marriage postal vote. While I do believe that such a change in Australian society needs to be asked of the Australian people, I do think the \$125 million-dollar postal vote was not the way to do this. I believe that the question should have been put to the people at the next Federal election. Where it probably would have generated a much greater return, and I think been less costly.

There is a raft of social inequalities that the \$125 million could/should have been spent on. The appalling state of indigenous health & education, the ridiculously long waiting lists for public dental health clinics and the issue of mental health and homeless people, being just a few. But this is now academic. The postal vote is proceeding and the money is spent.

So how should people vote? In spite of what people may conclude from the words I have written above, I am not advocating either a "No" nor a "Yes" vote. Nor am I suggesting people ignore their faith community leader's recommendation.

I think that a person must closely examine what their heart tells them. The wisdom of the Holy Spirit, will guide our hearts when we listen. It may take courage to listen, and then to do as our hearts says, especially if it says the opposite of what our heads want. Yet, it is precisely because what we feel, and thus speak, from our hearts that defines us, that here, we need to be attentive to the knowledge of our hearts.

Br Luke efo
Blue Mountains,
10th September 2017

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