

Ecclesiastical History

ST AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO (354-430CE) AND THE 'GOODS' OF MARRIAGE

We will have celebrated 24 weddings at Holy Trinity this year and so St Augustine's thought on marriage would be a most appropriate response to those readers of Bosham Life who have requested more of the great Church Father.

Augustine defended the state of marriage in his early years as a Christian convert. He did this in challenge against his former connection with the Manicheans who held that material creation including the body in terms of sexuality and marriage to be evil. Later, he went on to challenge what he perceived as the pseudo-optimism of the Pelagians who denied the importance of married chastity and the need of God's grace in order to fulfil it. We know from Augustine's writings, *The Confessions*, the way in which he experienced all the unhappiness that derived from the uncontrolled sexuality of his youth. Such was the conviction of his later Christian faith that he became a major exponent of the goodness of marriage albeit that he considered celibacy and virginity, when in the service of God, to be a superior state. He supported this argument with reference to St Paul (1 Corinthians 7) who argued that those who are celibate have more time for the Lord. Augustine therefore thought of marriage as good but celibacy as a greater good.

As his thought evolved, Augustine defended the state of marriage in terms of three fundamental 'goods', that is, values or blessings. For example, he wrote 'Let these nuptial goods be the objects of our love: offspring, fidelity, the unbreakable bond ... Let these nuptial goods be praised in marriage by him who wishes to extol the nuptial institution'. For Augustine, each of the essential properties of the conjugal society, its procreativity, its exclusiveness and permanence is a good thing that gives dignity to marriage. The three 'goods' are essential properties that distinguish the marital covenant from any other type of relationship between two people. These properties are the potential for the procreation of children, exclusive fidelity of the marital relationship between man and woman and the permanence of the marital relationship. He argued that these three 'goods' make marriage a morally and theologically valid and valuable institution. Indeed, his thought was to play a major role in subsequent ecclesiastical debate on marriage across the centuries.

When Augustine spoke of the sacrament or symbolism of marriage it was again with reference to St Paul's thought who compared marriage to the relationship between Christ and his Church, (Ephesians 5:21-33). According to this reference the 'new covenant in Christ' is necessarily monogamous and indissoluble. If marriage symbolises this relationship then it follows that for him divorce cannot be justified. When he spoke of the unitive 'good' of marriage Augustine had in mind Genesis (2:23-25), '... a man must leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife...' and to Mark (10:1-12) and Matthew (19:3-9) in which Jesus referred to the Genesis narrative and spoke against divorce. In other words, in Augustine's thought, marriage should be a totally faithful, monogamous and indissoluble union if the sacramental 'good' of Christ's relationship with His Church is to be realised. Indeed, he argued that marriage is a sacrament, to the extent that he equated it with Holy Baptism and Holy Orders.

Augustine also spoke of marriage as a remedy for lust or concupiscence. He seemed to regard marriage as a debt to be paid by husbands and wives to keep them from falling victim to temptation and sin. Indeed, yet again following St Paul, Augustine argued that it is better to be married than to burn! He favoured sexually abstemious marriage and argued that the

sexual act should be reserved for procreation only. Here, he followed Genesis (1:28) 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it ...'. So, for Augustine, procreation is a 'good' because it was there from the beginning of creation.

The question now arises. Does Augustine's doctrine on marriage have any bearing on 21st century Christian marriage particularly in the light of the effect of contraception on procreation? Certainly, by the 20th century the history of salvation with respect to marriage prior to the coming of the Messiah was not valid in Protestant thought. Indeed, it was argued that the fruitfulness of marriage does not depend entirely on procreation because there is no general command in the New Testament to continue the human race. Rather, the possibility of parenthood should be considered as a gift from God and not as a command. Under this criterion then the most important 'good' of marriage is the unitive 'good' that should reflect the union between Christ and his bride, the Church.

According to the Book of Common Prayer marriage was ordained firstly for the procreation of children. Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin and fornication and thirdly it was ordained for the mutual benefit that it brings to the wider society. Clearly, the order of the 'goods' of marriage as argued by Augustine is here maintained. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the text of the preface to Common Worship lays most emphasis on the unitive 'good' of marriage because it 'enriches society and strengthens the community'. The effect of the adoption of contraceptive methods on the procreative 'good' may well have led to the reversal of the order of Augustine's marital 'goods'. Indeed, as early as 1930 the Lambeth Conference agreed in principle to the use of contraception.

The hierarchy of the Augustinian 'goods' of marriage apart, all the elements of the great Church Father's thought remain intact and in use in the Anglican Church today. Indeed, looking back on his misspent youth Augustine reflected in *The Confessions*: 'Would that someone then had calmed my wretchedness ... so that the high-tide of my years could have reached its flood in marriage, and its quietness could have been complete in the begetting of children, as your law lays down ...'.

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