

About 70% of people who marry, live together first. Men do not generally marry until they are 30, while women marry at 28 or 29. Cohabitation gives the churches a problem – how to affirm marriage without alienating those people who have already anticipated their marriage vows. This is a difficult issue to face, and I am convinced there is a way forward that has not yet been tried.

### **False Starts**

Anglicans have not been lacking in their suggestions for dealing with cohabitation. Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher is said to have urged a liturgy for couples about to enter something he called a ‘trial marriage’. Greg Forster bravely raised the question (in 1988) whether ‘in some circumstances when a couple stand at the chancel steps, are they in fact merely ratifying legally and hallowing spiritually a marriage which has morally already existed since they set up home together?’ The Board of Social Responsibility’s report *Something to Celebrate* (1995) stated ‘The wisest and most practical way forward... may be for Christians both to hold fast to the centrality of marriage and at the same time to accept that cohabitation is, for many people, a step along the way towards that fuller and more complete commitment’ (p.114). More recently, the House of Bishops’ teaching document, ‘Marriage’ (1999) addressed an appendix to unmarried couples living together. Pastorally sensitive and with no trace of rebuke, the document urged those ‘living naturally together among your friends as husband and wife’, to ‘make the public stand that is implied by your way of life’ (p.22).

### **Pre-nuptial or non-nuptial?**

The trouble with some of these suggestions is that they are not proposals and they do not draw deeply enough upon the resources of scripture, tradition, reason or imagination. A ‘trial marriage’ is a contradiction. A basic distinction must first be made between people who intend marriage and live together first, and people who live together with no intention of marriage. This is the distinction between ‘pre-nuptial’ and ‘non-nuptial’ cohabitation. It is difficult to see how Christian traditions could ever incorporate non-nuptial cohabitation into a marital framework. Being ‘non-nuptial’ it excludes itself from marriage. And there are many practical reasons why it is a thoroughly bad idea.

### **A bad idea...**

Cohabitors are as likely to return to singleness as to enter marriage. These are the ones we don't hear so much about, yet in the early 90s about as many cohabitees broke up as went on to marry. Cohabitation has weakened the connection between marriage and parenthood, and children may suffer as a result. Some people choose cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, not as a preparation or 'trial' for it. Men, in particular, are likely to be less committed to the female partners they live with, and much less committed than women to any children of the partnership. Cohabitors with children are very likely to split up. Children raised by a single parent are likely to be conceived during an informal cohabitation. Children of cohabiting parents are worse off economically, and they are very much more vulnerable physically. And attitudes to marriage are negatively influenced by cohabitation. The experience of successive cohabitation impacts on attitudes to marriage, making marriage less likely, or if it happens, less successful. These are strong reasons for arguing that the process of legal recognition of cohabitation should be halted.

### **Betrothal**

Armed with the important distinction between pre-nuptial and non-nuptial cohabitation it is possible to see how the abandoned practice of betrothal would restore a sense of order and direction to living together before marriage. The rite of betrothal is retained in the churches of the East (where it is combined with marriage in a single lengthy rite). Betrothal was deprived of legal recognition by the Council of Trent in 1563 and in England and Wales only in 1753 (by the passing of the Hardwicke Marriage Act which had nothing to do with theology and everything to do with property).

Betrothal is thoroughly biblical. There are five cases of couples becoming married in the Bible by being first betrothed. They are Rebecca and Isaac (Gen.24), Rachel and Jacob (Gen.29), Zipporah and Moses (Ex.2), Sarah and Tobias (Tob.6-7) and Mary and Joseph (Mt.1). If betrothal is not the beginning of marriage, then Mary and Joseph were not married at the time of the conception and birth of Jesus. Whether they were married depends upon a prior view of when marriage begins. Betrothal is the assumed beginning of marriage in the Bible, and in Greek and Roman custom. It is also assumed in the marital imagery of the New Testament. St Paul compares the Corinthian church to a bride betrothed but not yet presented to Christ her 'true and

only husband'. (2 Cor.11:2-3) It is likely that the lengthy story of Jesus at the well with the Samaritan woman (Jn.4:1-42) is to be understood as a betrothal story because it relies on the literary conventions found in the betrothals of Rebecca, Rachel and Zipporah.

### **Spousals and nuptials**

Early marriage liturgies presume two occasions, each marked by appropriate rites and social events. The first is the *spousals*. This was once called 'the beginning of marriage' (*matrimonium initiatum*). The spousals were a promise to enter, at a future time, an irrevocable and permanent union. They were a conditional promise rendered unconditional by *nuptials* or solemnization of the marriage. The promise was made in the future tense. Sexual intercourse, or the nuptial liturgy (whichever came first!) rendered the conditional promise unconditional. Aquinas is clear that while spousals are dissoluble, the nuptials are not.

An 'archaeological' reading of the *Common Worship* Marriage Service (2000) reveals a fragment of the old betrothal vows of the first millennium. The bride and bridegroom are each asked two sequential questions - 'N, will you take N to be your [husband] wife? Will you love him, comfort him, honour and protect him, and, forsaking all others, be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?' The answer is 'I will'. It may be doubted whether many clergy and marrying couples are aware that the future tense of the question 'Will you take...?' and the future tense of the response 'I will' is a tangible relic of the first millennium, when the vows (or *weds*, or *troths*) were exchanged by the *betrothed* in anticipation of their nuptial ceremony sometime in the future.

What we now take for granted as a single rite was originally two rites, and the time has come to separate them again. If the betrothal rite were ever to be restored as a separate rite, the present marriage service would also be restored, *de facto*, to its previous temporal position in the couple's life-history, as the culmination of a process rather than a singular event licensing talk of 'before' and 'after'. The 'solemnization of marriage' as the Book of Common Prayer calls it, restores the supposition that a marriage already exists, and that it has now reached the point of no return, of

unconditional promise which requires the blessing of God and continuing divine grace to sustain it.

### **Stages**

A huge pastoral advantage of the double rite is that the transition period from singleness to marriage is marked in the couple's story. Once betrothed they are no longer single. They are beginning marriage, but the unconditional commitment which marriage assumes has not yet been required of them by the church, by their families and friends, or by each other.

Even if betrothal does not make an immediate comeback, recognition of it, even of the absence of it, draws attention to the processive character of marriage. The state of marriage, like the state of faith, is something we grow into. The Western emphases on consent (the vows) and consummation (sex) still provide a slight sense of process. If the spousals were brought back, the beginning of marriage could once more be celebrated liturgically.

### ***Church Times* Survey**

Anglicans have good reason to think that their theology is sometimes driven by the pastoral needs of faithful people. The pastoral needs of people living together before marriage require a real change in attitude and practice towards them. Stephen Lake's practical guide to the *Common Worship* Marriage Service supports some of the arguments in this article. He sees the liturgy as something that marks a 'stage' in a life journey. He acknowledges that betrothal and marriage are best understood when they are separated from each other, as they originally were.

Finally, the *Church Times* readers who took part in the paper's recent survey might well find the re-introduction of betrothal congenial. Only 27% thought living together outside marriage was OK. Even fewer (19%) thought it was OK for 'couples who intend to get married to live together first'. Yet only 43% thought that sex before marriage was wrong. But these questions assume that marriages begin with weddings, and that all living together outside marriage is the same. If marriage begins with betrothal, and the distinction between pre-nuptial and non-nuptial cohabitation is sound, then these questions need to be differently put. Many of those who are living together have already begun their marriage.

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