



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, August 27, 2006
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Choral Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Ephesians 5:21-23
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CHRIST, MARRIAGE AND LOVE

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The preacher who honors the Prayer Book lectionary is presented with three difficult readings from Holy Scripture today. Here are the choices: First there is Joshua, who calls the Israelites into a renewal of their covenant with God by challenging them, "You cannot (that is, you are not able to) serve the Lord." Second there is the Apostle Paul's teaching on marriage, in which he famously says that the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church. Third, in the Gospel, Jesus, having taught that he is the bread of life and that his followers are to eat and drink his flesh and blood, loses many of his followers. Let's take Saint Paul on husbands and wives!

Paul was reared in first century Judaism and was a free-born citizen of the Roman Empire. Time and modern prejudice make it hard for many today to appreciate Paul as the great Apostle of Christ. The fact is, in line with Jesus, Paul revolutionized marriage very quietly, as he did all other social relationships, including children and parents, slaves and masters, by upholding, against the secular and pagan cultures of the day, the dignity of every human being as a redeemed child of God (including women, children, slaves; also the sick, the poor, the weak, the helpless, and all others at risk of being discounted).

In the Church, wives are no longer to be property and without rights, as they were in the Roman world. The New Testament (the Apostle Paul) clearly teaches that wives are to be seen as co-equal with their husbands in a mutual, self-surrendering, unconditional, exclusive, life-long bond of love and respect that makes wives and their husbands one flesh; and that gives security to their offspring. I am not sure that Christendom has ever caught up with this teaching, even (especially) in today's throw-away culture. Were we to skip over to Saint Paul's more detailed teaching about marriage in his first Epistle to the Corinthians (I Cor 7:1-39), we might be surprised to hear the Apostle say bluntly reciprocal things such as: "The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does."

Well then, what about this business in Paul of the husband as head of the wife, as Christ heads his Bride the Church? This is no worldly boss we are talking about; rather, it is Christ who gives himself up, even to the cross, for the sake of his beloved, his Bride, his Body, the Church.

Jesus himself defined the issue of his authority and headship very clearly. The kings of the world, he said, exercise power and lordship; they “lord it over” their subjects. But it shall not be so among you, said Jesus. “Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves...I am among you as one who serves...and [who gives] his life as a ransom for many.” (Lk 22:24-30; Mt 20:25-28; Mk 10:42-45) This is the headship of Christ. So the loyalty of husband and wife is a reflection of the relation between Christ the Bridegroom and the Church his Bride; it goes all the way to the cross.

“In the Church,” wrote an early Christian Bible scholar,¹ “leaders are servants. The difference between secular rulers and Christian leaders is that the former love to boss their subordinates whereas the latter serve them.”

The great principle here, in marriage, yes, but all across the board in the Body of the Church, is that we are to have the same mind as Christ, who, though he was the co-eternal Son of God, did not count his equality with God as a thing to be grasped, but rather emptied himself, took upon him our human nature, and humbled himself as a servant, even to the death of the cross. This self-emptying is the secret of Christ’s authority and of all true Christian leadership patterned after him. “Wherefore, God has highly exalted him and given him the name which is above every name; that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven, on earth and under the earth; and that every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil 2: 5-11) That is an authority very different from worldly power, which is based on coercion. Jesus is self-emptying, yet he has the whole world in his hands. This mystery, culminating in the cross, constitutes Christ’s perennial power; it is why Christ is truly our food and drink, as in this Holy Communion.

A sermon is not the place to do marriage preparation, which often is best done confidentially between a couple and a priest. Each marriage has its own special circumstances which need to be addressed for each couple’s good. But what the Apostle has set forth as the model – namely the self-sacrificing love of Christ our Lord – is universally valid, not only for marriages, but also for all social relationships. Jesus, the Apostles, and the Church after them did not upend social hierarchy and tradition (and every age has its own hierarchy and tradition, including ours). But they did infuse everything with the spirit of Christ’s self-emptying lordship, so that the dignity of the human person, especially among the outcast, the poor, the weak, the marginalized, was honored and safeguarded as never before and nowhere else.

I always tell those I am preparing for marriage that their marriage will last, by God’s grace, if they declare their intention, without conditions, to submit themselves one to the other in a sacramental marriage, and make up their minds that they won’t have it any other way; that they solemnly make it their life’s work (their “job”) to love each other, come what may, first and last.

Romantic love, *eros*, is one thing. The love of friends, *philia*, is another. We trust that both are components in a marriage. But the essential thing is self-giving love, *agape*. This is the love that all Christians must have, the love which is an activity of the will, renewed every day. This is the love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things; the love which never ends; indeed, says Paul, this love is greater even than faith and hope.² Why? Because, when at last our life’s pilgrimage is ended, and we are face to face with God in his immediate presence, faith will give way to sight and hope will be fulfilled. Love, however, will be just as necessary as ever to live happily there with God; because, as Jesus has told us, God is love. Yes, please, whether we are married or not, let us submit ourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

¹ Saint Jerome commenting on Ephesians 5:21-33, cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, NT, Volume VIII*, p. 194

² Paul’s teaching on the superiority of *agape* love is most famously spelled out in I Cor 13:1-13, perhaps the most popular text currently used at marriage services.