

W E E K L Y M E D I T A T I O N

For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Corinthians 7:16)

Our scripture reading this week (Wednesday) includes the above verse in a passage taken from 1 Corinthians. Here the question being addressed by the Apostle is: should a believing spouse break off with an unbelieving one? While there may seem a certain logic in giving this a positive reply, the Apostle appeals here to the overarching purpose of marriage -salvation -and openness to the Lord's providential care.

A traditional account of marriage lists three 'goods' of marriage. These good things are faithfulness, stability (or permanence), fruitfulness (especially openness to having children). A slightly different list includes procreation (making babies), the satisfaction of nature (we are not meant to be alone), and - following the Apostle's own words - the restraint of lust (with all its destructive power). Yet another concept is sometimes noted - one familiar to us from the phrase 'community of marriage' in our wedding service - which sees marriage as a privileged place where intimacy nurtures and enriches 'mutuality', the reciprocal striving for the good and fulfillment of the other.

Overarching all of these things, however, is the most basic concept in Christian marriage: we marry in order to be saved, or - to put it another way - marriage is meant to be a path to salvation. Nothing is more important than salvation - not children, not the satisfaction of nature, not restraint of lust, not even 'mutuality' - although all of these have something to contribute to the struggle against the selfishness - the egotism - the struggle that is inevitably such an important part of our salvation. Whatever the terms by which we understand salvation, the fact is that it is always through humility, putting the other first, denying our own selfishness, our own acts of self-offering and self-sacrifice, our seeking the good of the other - and I dare say renewing our wonder and enchantment - that enables us to enter into a right relationship with God. Our relationship with our spouse is precisely the testing ground for all the moral and ethical principles we profess as believers. These various expressions of self-emptying love constitute precisely the path to salvation that Christ indicates to us when he says if any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.

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