

2.12.07, Genesis 2.18-25

I wonder how different you think that men and women really are.

Some years ago a book was published called *Men Are from Mars and Women are from Venus*. We're so different from each other, said the author - who was a man, by the way! - that it's as if we come from different planets.

Certainly most people know what it's like to suffer at the hands of the opposite sex. A huge proportion of women say that they have suffered physical assault or sexual abuse by men - or at least they've faced blatant sexual discrimination.

Many men would say they've experienced women attempting to get the better of them through manipulation, whether by words or by emotions.

Men and women are clearly different - and in our differences we often clash in sinful, destructive ways.

Now the way we relate to each other as men and women is something that concerns God very deeply - simply because he made us as men and women.

Regulars will know that we're in the middle of a sermon series looking at the very first chapters of the Bible - on creation.

And the first thing that should hit us between the eyes this morning is that God spends a good half of his description of the creation of humanity talking about how he made us to relate to each other as men and women.

Do take the church Bible and open it right at the beginning to p.4 - Genesis chapter 2. And you'll see that the whole of the second half of the chapter, which we're looking at this morning, is about men and women.

In fact, God's concern for men and women was there at the end of chapter 1 - look up at verse 27 of chapter 1 [READ].

The two sexes aren't an accident - it's how God intended it to be.

So this morning I want to give you the two main messages of chapter 2 on men and women. And then there'll be a third message to hear, when we see how the rest of the Bible develops this teaching.

(I should say, if you're a visitor this morning, that I know that there are good questions about the Bible, and creation and science that need answering. They're so important that we gave a whole sermon to that two weeks ago. I'm not going to repeat that now, but you can order a copy of the tape of that sermon today, or can download it from the church's website.)

But for this morning here's the first message from Genesis 2:

1. Men and women need each other.

Listen to verse 18 of chapter 2 [READ]. At the end of chapter 1 God looks at the whole of creation and says: 'It is very good'. But here we see that it would not be good with just one sex. God made us to need each other.

God shows Adam all the animals - but none of them is the companion and helper in life that he really needs.

Some people, it's true, think that a man's best friend is his dog. Now, a dog may do a better job of that than a goldfish - but it's still not the profound support that the man needs.

So God makes the woman by taking one of the man's ribs and creating her out of it.

(It's hard to be certain whether God intends this detail to give us a literal account of creation, or whether it's picture-language. That doesn't really matter - this point is what it's actually teaching us.)

And God is showing us that he created men and women to be equal in status.

Verse 23 is touching and tender, isn't it [READ]. It might not be exactly what any husband here said to his bride on his wedding-night, but you see what Adam's saying, don't you.

We talk about family ties as being 'flesh and blood'. The phrase that the Old Testament uses for the same thing is 'flesh and bone'. "We belong together", says Adam to his wife, "because we're made out of the same stuff." How can he look down her, when she was made out of him?

A famous Christian writer called Matthew Henry put it this way: "She was not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled on by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved."

That captures well the emotional power of what Adam says when he first see his wife - and they're the emotions that everyone who truly falls in love feels.

Genesis was revolutionary in this when it was first written. Of course lots of other civilisations had their own mythical accounts of creation around that time - but out of all of them it's only Genesis that puts man and woman together on the same level, to be partners together.

The Bible's account of creation has sometimes been mocked. One of the early feminist magazines in the twentieth century was ironically called 'Spare Rib', as if Genesis belittled women. But of course the opposite is true - God's insists in the Bible that men and women are equal in status as his creatures made in his image, and that's still revolutionary.

Every married Christian man needs to ask himself: Does my wife feel belittled by me? Do I ever make her feel weak and useless and silly? Or do I treat her with the tenderness due to someone who is 'made in the image of God', my own 'flesh and blood'.

And God would ask every Christian wife: Does my husband know I respect him? Does he feel that I use words and emotions to get him to do what I want? Or do I treat him as standing side-by-side with me, together forming the image of God with me?

No one really knows what goes on behind closed doors in someone else's marriage. Every married Christian answers directly to the Lord for themselves on this.

Men and women are equal in status - but we are different in role.

It is the woman who is made a helper, suitable for the man, not the other way round, in verse 18.

It is him who names her, not the other way round - calling her 'woman' in verse 23 - and then, in chapter 3, naming her 'Eve'.

In what sense is the woman man's 'helper'?

It's this: she complements him. (That's not 'compliments', in the sense of saying nice things about him - although it's OK to do that!).

It's 'complements' - meaning completing each other, filling in for each other's differences, and strengths and weaknesses.

Our society finds it hard to imagine that two people can be made for different roles, but still be equal in status - because in our world your value is measured not by who you are but by what you earn, and by what you achieve.

I know that in many families with children both husband and wife just have to work to pay the mortgage. But where a Christian family can survive on one salary - and the mother, (or occasionally the father), chooses to stay at home with the children - some of her friends are often incredulous. "Is that why you got your education, to change nappies?!" A woman can be made to feel that she's betrayed other women by choosing to be a full-time mother.

But the Christian knows that God himself is the great model of being equal in status, but different in role.

God the Father and God the Son are equal in their glorious status as God. But their roles are different - it was the Son who willingly submitted to his Father, came to and suffer and die for us - without for one second losing his standing as God.

That is why a Christian should be able to serve and serve and serve - without ever feeling demeaned.

God made men and women equal in status - but different in role.

Now Adam and Eve are certainly examples of men and women in general - but they are also the original married couple. Do you see how verse 24 applies their situation to every subsequent marriage? [READ].

So here's the second great message of this part of the Bible:

2. Marriage is at the heart of God's creation.

Marriage is not simply something we invented that might have been fine once, but which can be ditched if we don't like it any more.

Marriage is a principle of creation: it's the mould that humanity was designed to fit.

(Let me just say: we're talking here of humanity as a whole. There is a message here for those who are not married, and that's coming in a moment.)

A marriage makes a new family: “for this reason a man will leave his father and mother...”.

We probably all know marriages that have been undermined by a mother-in-law who wouldn't let go. Of course a couple need to keep honouring their parents, but it's especially the husband's responsibility to make sure that he has really left. His wife must know that his first loyalty lies with her.

And marriage is also a covenant.

That's the message of verse 24, when it says that a husband is “united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”

“One flesh” is a powerful image. It describes sexual union, of course - but also emotional union.

It explains why people going through a divorce or a bereavement sometimes describe feeling as if a part of them has actually been ripped away.

It also explains why adultery is so serious. It rips at the fabric of the family God created in bringing husband wife together.

Our translations here use the word ‘united’ - “united to his wife”. That's a bit weak. The word really means - “stick to, hold fast to.”

It's what the wedding-vows mean when they say: “for better, for worse, for richer for poorer.”

And here's the key thing: it's a word that God often uses in the Bible to describe the covenant-relationship he offers us. If we will hold fast to him, he will never let us go.

So marriage is a covenant, not a contract. A contract would come with strings attached: “I’ll love you... as long as you stay attractive, as long as you’ve got money.”

A covenant says just what God says to us: “I am committed to you - for better, for worse.”

So do you see now why marriage is so important in creation?

It’s because God gave it to us as a picture of the relationship with him that God offers us.

Verse 25 says... [READ]. There’s an intimacy and an openness there with each other - it’s a pointer to the intimacy and openness with God that he longs to give us.

I said there’d be a third message here, from how the rest of the Bible develops this teaching - and, to see it, turn on a long way to Ephesians 5.31. I’ll read from verse 31 [READ verses 31-33].

Here is Genesis 2, quoted in the New Testament. And do you see how it takes what Genesis says about the marriage-relationship, and shows that marriage is a sign-post to an even greater relationship - the relationship between Jesus Christ and the people who have turned in trust to him.

What is it like, if I take the step of trusting in Christ?

Well, think of a great marriage that you know - or imagine one, if you prefer to, because of your own experiences.

Think of the husband's selfless love, his commitment, his faithfulness. That, says God, is a small visual aid of what God is really like, and who he will be for you, if you turn to Christ.

So marriage is not ultimately what God made us for. Men and women need each other, yes. Marriage is at the heart of God's creation, yes. But ultimately,

3. God made us to belong to Jesus Christ.

If you're not married - you may sometimes feel that you're missing out on something that you long for. But marriage is not the final destination. God has not withheld his greatest blessing from you. The final destination, the greatest blessing - the ultimate reality that marriage points to - is an eternal, loving relationship with God through Christ.

So if you have Christ, you've got the great thing that God created you for. There's no need to despair about have missed out on the sign-post, when you've already arrived at the destination.

And if you are married - be as faithful to the Lord in your marriage.

A married person demonstrates that they really do know Christ, by loving their spouse as selflessly and sacrificially as Christ has loved us.

And if you're here this morning and wouldn't call yourself a committed Christian, maybe your take-home message from the Bible today is this:

If God just seems vague and intangible to you, look again at how he made us... how he gave us marriage as a sign-post to his faithful love for us....

And come to see that - just as there's no marriage if you don't turn up and say your vows - so there's no relationship with God, if we don't accept Jesus Christ.