

on into marriage with unhealthy results. On the other hand are we to abstain from all sexual enjoyment before marriage refusing a gentle embrace or other gesture as a means of expressing love and affection? Between these two extremes lies the path that most tread. The exact pattern of behaviour for an engaged couple is a personal decision. They should be encouraged to openly discuss the problem recognising their own sexual needs and desires, but should each consider the other's highest good, and each other as integrated wholes not consisting of a sexual part which can be exploited for satisfaction and a non-sexual part for church activities. Let them recognise and acknowledge their physical relationships to be secondary in importance compared with their relationship with Christ, who is the pioneer and perfection of our faith, and who for the joy that was before Him endured the cross, in order that He might bring us to Himself. (Heb. 12: 1 f.).

JULIAN W. CHARLEY

## 4: The Christian attitude to the single life

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In the purpose of God a married life is the norm for men and women. The principle is vividly set out in the second chapter of Genesis but Jesus taught his disciples that the norm would not always be operative. Some will be born incapable of such bi-sexual relationships (presumably for either physiological or psychological reasons); others will be made incapable by men; yet a third category will deliberately choose the single life 'for the sake of the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 19: 12). Since both men and women are made in the image of God (Gen. 1: 27), a single life need not spell incompleteness. Indeed the earthly life of Jesus, the 'express image' of God (Heb. 1: 3), ought to put paid to any such suggestion. The apostle Paul goes so far as to say that both the married and the single life are 'special gifts' from God (1 Cor. 7: 7). The word he uses is *charisma*, the same as that employed to describe spiritual gifts within the church. That surely suggests a pattern of divine dispensation by the Spirit to be accepted as readily and gladly as the Lord's distribution to his servants of every other gift.

This is the proper starting-point for a Christian attitude to the single life. It is neither superior to the married life, as one Christian tradition has long implied, nor is it inferior. The essential thing is to discover God's special gift for one and to accept it happily and

realistically. The tendency for the single person is to see all the credits on the side of marriage and all the debits in celibacy. But every walk of life has its problems and limitations as well as its blessings. A self-pitying, unrealistic and romantic view of marriage is no help in coming to terms with a real-life situation. Many a harassed housewife or exhausted husband feels at times a yearning for freedom from home-ties, but that equally must be tackled as a selfish desire to escape from God-given responsibilities. Paul was not the misogynist that some people have suggested, but he valued the opportunities for the gospel's sake of being single—'I wish that all were as I myself am' (1 Cor. 7: 7). The picture has two sides.

To be single gives a considerable measure of freedom that the married person lacks. In Christian work it provides the opportunity for undivided attention to the job in hand, without the pressures and responsibilities of a home always needing to be taken into consideration (1 Cor. 7: 32-35). Personally I have valued this in numerous ways—as a youth leader able to have my home regularly trampled over by London kids; as a college lecturer able to spend far more time informally with the students; as a preacher able to travel widely abroad for considerable periods of time. If you love people and serve them, God gives you a large family of a different sort as a rich compensation for what you lack in a home of your own (cf. Mk. 10: 29 f.). Of course there are some limitations, but this is in the very nature of the Body of Christ and the sharing of God's gifts. There is even greater freedom in the way you may choose to spend your times of relaxation. Here is a privilege not to be treated lightly.

It is important to remember that God's gift at one stage of a person's life may be altered later. We may believe we have an inner assurance about God's purpose for our future, but I guess we are very rarely certain. This is not to advocate being in a state of constant wistfulness, but it is to reject also a sense of fatalistic resignation to 'being on the shelf'. God is good and loving, knowing our needs and innermost desires. His gifts and His timings are for our ultimate good, if only we can believe it. Even a relationship that proves a cul-de-sac may be a very precious and enriching experience in the purpose of God.

Vital also is the awareness that sex never dies. The attraction of the opposite sex, not just physically, is part of being human—and this does not disappear as we grow older. Feelings of loneliness and insecurity are sure to come, and we must be ready for them.

Let me end with two practical lessons. First, maintain a wide range of interests. God gave us all things richly to enjoy. So often it is boredom that leads to self-pity. We can even be so absorbed by

'religious' things that our life is stunted. A family compels parents to pursue the questioning interests of children, constantly varying as they grow up. The single person should make due compensation—and he has the freedom to do so. Second, maintain a wide range of friendships. If the depth of marriage commitment to one person is not yours, then discover the wealth of relationships with many people, male and female, young and old. In the process your personality will find itself blossoming instead of remaining a bud that grows wizened as the years go by. The initiative will need to be yours: the rewards are great.

Rejoice in God's good gift, whatever it may be.