

**SEM Sermon**  
**St Peter's, Vere Street, London W1**  
**22 January 2004**

If you wonder what I'm doing here, you'll understand when I say it's not easy to say 'no' to Rex Chester. I know, I was his Vicar, and remember those Parish Council meetings when a voice from the end of the table would say 'Mr Chairman...' and you'd feel Rex's gimlet eyes fixing you, in the sure and certain knowledge that something imaginative, challenging and probably uncomfortable was on the way. Of course the imaginative, challenging and uncomfortable can sometimes be disturbingly prophetic. It was a real privilege as Rex's Vicar to bless his and Sarah's marriage, and to learn in doing so that marriage was something that he had in many ways much taken to heart....and then to find that a later gleam in his eye was the notion of engaging teenagers in reflecting on the relationship and commitment of marriage. Well, there was something imaginative, challenging and uncomfortable. As the then parent of three teenagers I thought him brave to attempt an engagement in anything, let alone considering the institution of marriage.

Because quite apart from the timelessness of adolescence, Rex's gleam coincided – though no coincidence – with the rise of post-modernity. A generation and more on from the sexual and economic revolution of the '60's, our culture is now characterised by a pick'n'mix approach that seems to apply to most values and all beliefs. The moderns – which is many of us, in whose post-Enlightenment culture we grew up – asked 'Is it true?' The post-moderns – the worldview in which our young people are growing up – ask 'Is it real? Does it work?' Lifestyle choice is what establishes identity, and identity is flexible, chameleon-like. There is a constant readiness to change, and an ability to change at short notice. At the same time there is an absence of commitments of the 'til death us do part' style. Our world is a place of discontinuous change, deconstructed stories, decimated hope, knee-jerk irony and ubiquitous self-doubt. Individualism is rampant, and institutions are suspect. Everyone here knows how marriage is a social and religious institution that has suffered, and the knock-on effects and their cost in every sense...

Why should marriage matter? Tonight's first reading reminds us that in the Judeo-Christian tradition marriage is a creation ordinance, woven into the fabric of human being. The Christian tradition would take that further, and say that marriage reflects something of the very nature of God. Because at the heart of marriage – the ideal of relationship between one man and one woman committed to each other for life – is the idea of love as self-giving exchange. And for Christians such exchange of self-giving love lies at the heart of God – three in one – a unity dynamic in relationship, a pattern of eternal mutuality.

It is an ideal; as our second reading from the Letter to the Ephesians reminds us, it is a mystery. In a lifetime of marriage we may never achieve the ideal. Marriage can be great joy and terrible pain. It can be enormous fun and desperate tedium... At this point I have to say that my wife is not in the congregation – I think she's now just about leaving work! Marriage can flourish and wither. For better or worse, it is dynamic throughout the life of the married couple. It is a unique relationship.

/cont'd

As a sixteen-year-old lad said in one of your workshops 'Marriage is a gateway into a place that you can get into no other way'. SEM aims to consider marriage as part of students' education. Perhaps marriage is the ultimate human education – and I'd like to suggest that it is an education in three things.

It is forced out the grammar of emotional literacy. I vividly remember over 25 years ago going as a young gynaecology house surgeon with my consultant boss to the local comprehensive school to do a sex education session. My job was to blow up condoms and release them round the room at the appropriate moment! It was fun, but it was facile. May I congratulate SEM on the difference of your approach to such mechanistic naivety – which would of course now be laughed embarrassedly out of court by the intelligent, streetwise and sexually-aware young people of today.

SEM's education recalls the root of that word: e-ducare – 'to lead out, to draw out'. You certainly don't preach. You actually don't teach. Your method is as good as your intent, and in your workshops and conferences your process is as important as your content. We all learn by seeing and doing – not by being told. Exploration is your name and your method: exploration of marriage as a key societal institution, and as a human interpersonal relationship. And you explore real marriages. Your married couples bravely offer their actual experience – for better or worse – for consideration. You also understand how we humans are motivated by setting our own agenda. So you give young people autonomy; your students make the running. That's risky – unpredictable, unstructured. But like the risk of marriage, you strengthen it with care. Everyone here knows and appreciates the rigorous professionalism with which such spontaneous explorations are undergirded – the framework, the preparation, the follow-up, the support. What a tribute to your aims, your method, your couples and your adviser-coaches that at the end of a workshop a young offender could say 'I want a relationship like they have!'

Marriage is special. A human, committed, unfolding relationship of love over many decades, that can offer within it the security necessary for children to grow up – it needs all the enlightened support we can give. It demands the attention and care of the churches. A wise government would review all the factors – social, financial, legal and psychological – which discourage people from marrying, and make proposals to reduce them. While so many are hesitant to use the M word, or are merely wringing their hands and bewailing what probably never was, SEM is quietly, sanely, fruitfully, hopefully pursuing its vocation with our young people. Yours is an idea whose time has clearly come. You are furthering human and Kingdom values. Thank you. Well done. Build on it. Pray for it. SEM is an investment in all our futures.

*Peter Lippiett*

*Portsmouth Diocese Adviser on Spirituality*