

**Tuesday 24 June 2008**  
**Wives Fellowship Regional Day Service**  
**Celebrating Family Life**

**The Dean**

Between the two World Wars the Bishop of Exeter was Lord William Cecil of the famous Hatfield House family. In that old aristocratic way he was much loved by the people of my native Devonshire because he treated everyone the same. He was, however, very eccentric in that he was extremely forgetful! One evening in 1919 he was at a great service in St Andrew's Plymouth, giving thanks for all that women of that city had done for the war effort – particularly in the docks and in munitions. The vicar preached and started brilliantly. "The happiest days of my life" he said, "were spent in the arms of another man's wife. My mother." All the ladies purred and the bishop stroked his white beard, vowing to remember the story for another occasion. That came soon afterwards at a huge gathering of the Mothers' Union in the Cathedral at which the Lord Bishop was the preacher. He climbed into the pulpit, the building packed with hundreds of very upright and straight-laced ladies and proclaimed "The happiest days of my life have spent in the arms of another man's wife. Hmm....can't remember who she is now?"

Preaching about family life and marriage today is a real challenge. To talk frankly and in all its clinical details is acceptable in books, lectures, discussion groups – but not really acceptable, I feel, from the pulpit. And yet, the preacher who confines him or herself to high-sounding moral generalities is liable to be dismissed as boring or worse, having nothing to offer people's real situations.

So, down to brass tacks. In the Marriage Service the couple take each other "for better, for worse." Yes, the better and the worse in the other partner. And at the heart of the Christian understanding of marriage is forgiveness. It is true that Jesus set very high standards for his followers, in relationships as in other things. But he didn't commit the fatal error of most high-minded reformers and make everything depend on success. He realized that we must have high ideals, that we must for our very health's sake aim only at the best and not be content with the easy and the mediocre. But he also realized that we fail and will go on failing. And so central to his teaching is that this need not matter provided we are prepared to forgive and start again. "And forgive us trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" we pray every day.

That is a staggering requirement especially in a marriage. Perhaps not in the case of two nice, well-adjusted, easily compatible people, who stay in love and who enjoy each other's company – not, of course, the same thing. But most marriages and relationships are not like that – for the simple reason that most of us are not nice, well-adjusted, open, adaptable, mature people. Most of us have hang-ups, problems, deep fears and insecurities, prejudices ingrained from childhood, unpleasant habits and fatal weaknesses. We may at heart be unable to show real affection, we may be greedy, demanding or compulsive liars. But we fall in love, maybe with someone who is also physically infatuated and does not see through us, or quite possibly with someone who is sub-conscientiously attracted to us because they suffer from the very same failings. Forgiveness, yes to 70 times 7, is asked for. But there are and will be failures – and I, for one, would wish to say loud and clear that I do not see failure in

marriage as the unforgivable sin. Nevertheless and thank God, for many people still lifelong partnership is perfectly possible. And when it is feasible it is a prize to be sought at all costs.

And the times I have heard the claim “Getting married is a cage. We live together because we want to.” What all that totally ignores is the incalculable creative value of formal commitment. A child is free to develop without fear because it believes its parents will never abandon it or cease to love it. That is why the withdrawal of love and the giving of harsh punishments is all so savagely destructive. We all need that kind of security if we are to grow and mature. So, far from being a cage, the marriage relationship is a liberation, because it provides us just this: a love on which we can rely. And those who have consolidated this by years of mutual forgiveness, appreciation and understanding attain a depth of humanity, a quality of living, which those who move from relationship to relationship, however serious or well-meaning, never even suspect, leave alone experience.

If you are able, thank God today for your marriage, for those who have shared or still share your home; pray to be forgivers as well as forgiven and pray that God may use you to support those around you, perhaps member of your own family, quietly, sensitively and prayerfully as they seek to build up their relationships in this very demanding world.

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