

Theology of Blessings and Liturgies of Blessing

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Some people like to point out that we Anglicans have no problem blessing dogs and cats; but we are having difficulty coming to terms with blessing two people who love each other, if they are of the same sex.

There is, of course, a profound reason for this hesitation; and I certainly do not wish to make light of it. We are rightly concerned lest there be an erosion of standards, boundaries, and ideals in regard to that relationship which is so profoundly important to us, both as Christians and as a society: the relationship of marriage.

It is to address just such concerns that I propose to answer the following four questions:

1. What does blessing mean in the Christian tradition?
2. Why does the Church bless opposite-sex couples (that is, why did we get into the wedding business)?
3. Why do some of us believe it is good and right to extend this blessing to homosexual couples?
4. Does this mean supporting 'gay marriage'?

1. Although the Bible nowhere describes (or prescribes) the liturgical blessing of a marriage, it is, nevertheless, full of blessing, from the beginning. In the very first chapter, we hear how God spent six days creating the world, filling it with living things and blessing them. God rested on the seventh day and blessed that, too. Blessing is what God did for Abraham and Sarah, so that they in turn might be a blessing to all nations. Blessing is at the heart of that painful story about Isaac and his two sons, Jacob and Esau, both of whom were trying to inherit their father's blessing, which he in turn had inherited from his father, Abraham.

Later, we hear how determined God was that Jacob's descendants, the people of Israel, would also inherit the blessing, even though they were enslaved in Egypt, and so God sent Moses to bring them out into a land of blessing. Israel's priests are told to bless the people, saying "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace." The Psalms, too, are full of blessing: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name." And so on.

Notice that the first sense of blessing is something God does toward the world. Our Book of Occasional Celebrations defines it like this: “blessing is a state of well-being given by God for the fulfilment of creation”. Or, we might say, God adds to the goodness already inherent in creation by empowering it to become that new creation which God had in mind from the beginning. And apparently that empowerment can be passed on – from parent to child, from priest to people.

The second sense of blessing is the liturgical one: something we do toward God. When we ‘bless’ God, we are thanking God for the way God blesses us. Clearly, then, these two different senses of ‘blessing’ are linked together. In fact, the greatest examples of blessing prayers, both in the Bible and in our liturgy, begin by celebrating the goodness of God seen in the blessings God bestows on the creation, and then go on to ask God to empower the creation to fulfil the purpose God has for it.

A good example of liturgical blessing from the Bible is the Benedictus: Zechariah’s blessing pronounced upon his newborn son, John the Baptist. It begins with thankfulness for God’s saving help in the past: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David”; and it ends with an expression of hope for the future: “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Thanksgiving for mercies past and hope for the future are implicit in every act of blessing God.

Or consider the way we ‘bless bread and wine’ in the Eucharist. We begin by giving God thanks and praise: we remember all that God has done in creation, in calling Israel to be God’s covenant partner, and above all in sending Jesus to share our life; we remember the violent death he suffered at our hands, and his exaltation by God; specifically we remember how Jesus showed us the meaning of his life and death through the sign of bread and wine. Then we ask God to send the Spirit upon us and upon the food we share so that by eating and drinking together we may be formed into the body of Christ and reveal in the world God’s reign of peace and justice.

This is our central liturgical act of blessing; and its everyday analogue is the simple act of ‘saying grace’ at meals. It has much in common with the Jewish understanding of blessing: in contemporary Jewish theology, every good thing is created by God for God’s

good pleasure, and so it is presumptuous to take those things for our own use or pleasure until we have first thanked God for them. From this point of view, a prayer of blessing is offered in order to release a created thing for our creaturely use. Indeed, it is by naming the goodness God has given that we release its power in our lives.

Unfortunately, over time, Christian thinking began to make an artificial distinction between thanking and blessing; and this false distinction permitted the rise of the strange notion that blessing was something powerful a bishop or priest could do to a person or a thing to make it holy, converting something profane into something sacred. We need to recover the original sense of the act of blessing as an act of thanksgiving for something that is already good and holy.

2. What, then, are we to make of that powerful ritual for blessing a marriage that the Church has developed over the centuries?

Let's begin by reiterating what it means to for us to 'bless' something: it is in fact God that we bless by giving thanks for this thing God has made or done, and then we pray that God will enable it to become all that God intends. This, of course is something we want to do for any good thing in our lives. But it has become a really big deal for Christians to bless God for a marriage relationship, praying that it will be (and I quote) "a sacrament of [God's] love to this broken world"; for that is what we ask of God in our contemporary wedding ceremony.

This act of blessing couples in their relationship is now treated as if it bears a burden of significance even greater than, for example, the blessing of a congregation. Of course, couples are blessed in their relationship every time they participate together in the Eucharist – and some of them are straight and some of them are gay. This is a dimension of the Eucharist we commonly overlook because we have allowed it to be distorted by our excessive individualism. But the blessing bestowed through the body and blood of Christ is not merely the blessing of my restored communion with God; it is equally the blessing of restored communion with all who share that holy food with me. That is why we exchange the Peace before we approach the Table: I cannot receive the blessing of communion at all if I cannot receive the blessing together with you. So when I and my partner share in communion, we receive God's blessing on our relationship.

Nevertheless, we all apparently feel that more is at stake in blessing a couple who actually request a blessing on their relationship. What is this 'more', this greater significance?

The introduction read aloud at the beginning of every wedding locates this huge significance in the analogy between the couple's relationship and the relationship between Christ and his Church. It is this capacity of a particular kind of relationship to be an image of the relationship between God and the people of God that we celebrate and bless in this very dramatic way; and so we give it a sacramental significance.

To see the point of this, we need to go back to the beginning again. The story of the Bible can be told as the story of God-the-Romancer, risking the vulnerability of love, seeking a friend and partner within the created order: God walking in the garden of Eden, calling to Adam and Eve, "Where are you?"; God inviting Abraham and Sarah to be God's friends on a journey into a promised future; God calling Israel out of Egypt to a rendezvous in the desert, saying, "I will be your God and you will be my people"; God making a covenant with David, to "build him a house". And yet, by the time of the prophets, we hear God lamenting the unfaithfulness of this people, like a forlorn and betrayed lover.

But this vulnerability of God-the-Lover finds fulfilment at last in the relationship between Christ and his Church. In the Letter to the Ephesians we hear how Christ has espoused the Church to himself. And the Bible comes to its grand climax with wedding imagery: the holy city prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; the Spirit and the bride crying, "Come, Lord Jesus."

William Countryman has observed that "without human love, we would have almost no analogy for our relationship with God. Flawed as all human love is, it is still the best thing in our makeup, the brightest treasure that God placed there. And it is by this that God calls us home."

It is important to add, however, that the Bible also records the perennial failure of God's people in this covenant relationship. Faithful loyalty to the one true God has been a challenge for us, to say the least; at the same time, we are always tempted to think that because God has chosen us, God has in effect rejected others. We quickly forget that our calling is to be a priestly people, called into covenant for the sake of God's love for all

people. A marriage which truly reflects this covenant relationship will be one that exists not merely for personal fulfilment but as a way of participating in God's new creation.

The capacity of marriage to be an image of this divine-human covenant with its priestly vocation has, of course, changed with the changing shape of marriage; for clearly, marriage has not always meant the same thing. Within the Bible itself we have watched marriage evolve from polygamy to monogamy. Since that time, we have watched it evolve from a master/handmaid relationship toward one of equality and mutuality; from a primarily reproductive agenda toward a primarily relational one; from an economic institution toward a shared discipline of soul-making. Indeed, our very doctrine of marriage has changed in our own lifetime, through the changes in our wedding ceremony: the doctrine that a woman is the property of a man was challenged by the removal of the bride's promise of obedience (in the 1962 Book of Common Prayer), and was finally eliminated by the removal of the 'giving away of the bride' (in the 1985 Book of Alternative Services).

But it is the capacity of a marriage relationship to reflect the loveliness of God's great project in creating the world, and to reflect as well the faithful love by which that project will be brought to fulfilment, that accounts for the enormous investment the Church has made in celebrating and blessing the marriage covenant, and treating it as sacramental.

That is why, in order to be sacramental, such a relationship must be covenantal. In his great hymn to love, Paul speaks about that coming day when "I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." In marriage, however, we dare to grasp this transcendent goal through sexual intimacy – what the Bible so consistently refers to as 'knowing' one another. Such total knowing would ultimately harm us if it were not grounded in exclusive faithfulness and the full intention of permanence. Only by refusing to run away, refusing to turn aside to some other, 'easier' intimacy, can we hope for that maturing which is our true salvation. Only within the constancy of a covenant can we hope for the healing of forgiveness when we fail one another.

Notice, then, that in that same introduction which we hear at every wedding, this relationship is valued first of all "for the hallowing of the union betwixt a man and a woman" (as the Book of Common Prayer puts it), or for "their mutual comfort and help, and that they may know each other with delight and tenderness in acts of love" (as the Book of Alternative Services puts it). Yes, procreation is also mentioned; yet procreation is clearly secondary and not required. For Christians, the reason marriage is such a big

deal is that it mirrors the relationship of covenant faithfulness between God and God's people, between Christ and the Church – whether there are children or not. Both the Book of Common Prayer and the Book of Alternative Services clearly envision the possibility of a Christian wedding even for couples who will not be having children.

3. Thus far, Christians who oppose the blessing of same-sex relationships and those who support such blessings find themselves on common ground.

In fact the real issue about blessing same-sex unions must be settled outside of the topic assigned to us in this session. Is it true that God has created some people who can only find their proper intimacy with someone of the same sex? Is it true that the Bible, in all its comments about sexual relations, does not actually resolve this issue for us? Is it true that some same-sex unions are shaped by a commitment to faithful love and mutuality? Is it true that some same-sex unions mirror the relationship of Christ and his Church? If we are convinced that the answer to all these questions is yes, then we will feel obliged to celebrate and bless same-sex unions that are holy, just as we celebrate and bless opposite-sex unions that are holy.

Indeed, we are a sacramental people, defined by the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. All action by the baptized that demonstrates the love of God and is exercised in the name God may be said to be sacramental in nature, for it partakes of and demonstrates the grace of God. How can we refuse to bless it? Rowan Williams observes that “when we bless sexual unions, we give them a life, a reality not dependent on the contingent thoughts and feelings of the people involved; but we do this so that they may have a certain freedom to ‘take time’ to mature and become as profoundly nurturing as they can.”

The critical question we must answer before we bless a particular same-sex relationship is whether it is already a relationship blessed by God, already a relationship that is good and holy. But the Christian tradition of blessing relationships can teach us what to look for, what to recognize as good and holy. And what we must look for is a relationship in which two people are united in love as Christ is united with his Church.

If we do bless same-sex unions, then, we shall look for the same conditions we seek in opposite-sex couples. We shall need to know that there is a commitment to a relationship exclusive of all other partners, and an intention of permanence in the

relationship. And we shall expect the relationship to be lived out within the household of God, accountable to God's people, and supported by God's people.

4. The last question I want to address, then, is the question about 'gay marriage'. Some will ask: If the reason for blessing certain same-sex unions is the same as the reason for blessing certain opposite-sex unions, surely we must call all such unions 'marriage'?

I would like to suggest, however, that this question threatens to distract us from the real issue. Our concern should be to say as clearly as possible what we mean by the act of blessing. Notice, for example, that in the Book of Common Prayer this act is named 'Holy Matrimony'. (Although the word 'marriage' is also used in the rite, it appears to be used only to refer to the relationship as seen from the point of view of society and the law.) What the liturgy is concerned with, in other words, is not defining marriage but blessing a particular kind of marriage.

Defining marriage is something society will insist on doing, since marriage is a matter of concern for the whole social order. (After all, marriage existed as a socially defined estate long before the Church did; we do not own the word or its definition.) What we are concerned with, and what the liturgy is concerned with, is the special meaning and destiny that a particular relationship is going to have because we bless God for it and give it a sacramental identity.

What then shall we call those relationships which are the bearers of this blessing? The title 'Holy Matrimony' is no longer satisfactory even for opposite-sex couples. I do not think we have a serviceable term at the moment for either straight or gay sacramental unions. The only way we can name such relationships is simply to bless them; and until someone comes up with a new term, the act of blessing will have to suffice.