

The Ten Commandments

The seventh article by Neil Richardson in our year-long series



7th Commandment:

You shall not commit adultery

This commandment is less to do with sexual morality and more to do with property and progeny.

In the patriarchal society of the ancient world, men regarded women as property (the origin of a father giving the bride away at a wedding) and whilst a man could have concubines, this was not regarded as adultery. Adultery was the crime of confusing who was who's off spring and so muddying the waters of who would inherit property, titles and wealth.

It is difficult to appreciate that the notion of romantic love leading to a long and happy marriage is a rather modern idea. In some echelons of society in the past, and to some extent still so today, marriage was seen as a way of forging alliances, combining empires and joining financial forces. The fact is that in the past most rich and powerful figures had marriages for legal and financial reasons but did not confuse all that with love and sexual relationships.

"When a man marries his mistress, he creates a vacancy."

Sir James Goldsmith



Charles II and Nell Gwynne

Charles II had his Queen and his Nell Gwynne. Edward VII had his Lily Langtry when still prince of Wales, and the present Prince of Wales had his Camilla, now the Duchess of Cornwall.

English Law used to state that adultery was an automatic trigger for divorce. That was changed to "irretrievable breakdown" of the relationship, but adultery is one of the marks of such a breakdown. It is obvious that when a marriage partner deceives and betrays trust by committing adultery, there must be issues of a deeper nature driving the action. Whilst the sexual encounter may not in itself be enough to cause breakdown, the sense of betrayal and the depth of deceit involved often cause one partner to crack.

Every time I conduct a marriage ceremony I marvel at the heat of love which stands there before the congregation ready to make vows of a substantial and permanent nature.

The statistics of the last 50 years show a decline in marriage ceremonies and in a way, it is understandable. Whether the vows are exchanged in a church ceremony or in a Town Hall marriage suite or in a hotel wedding room or on a sun-drenched Caribbean beach, the promises are the same and they are very difficult to keep over a sustained period of time. It is always heartening and inspiring that young people are still willing to stand up there and make a public declaration of their intentions, loud and clear. This is a public service, encouraging commitment and reminding the older people of what they ought to be doing in their relationship!

I, ...take you, ...
to be my wife,
to have and to hold
from this day forward;
for better, for worse,
for richer, for poorer,
in sickness and in health,
to love and to cherish,
till death us do part;



I give you this ring
as a sign of our marriage.
With my body I honour you,
all that I am I give to you,
and all that I have I share with you,
within the love of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit
according to God's holy law.
In the presence of God I make this vow.



The level of commitment is so high. It is "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer." I remember one bride who as she said the vows, turned to the congregation and with an histrionic gesture, almost shouted the words "for RICHER" then softly, almost unspoken, "for poorer!!" Not quite the spirit of marriage, I thought to myself. Trouble ahead, perhaps?

It is unsurprising that some people prefer to just give it a go, live together for a while and see what happens. It is obvious that the complications of getting out of an informal relationship are so much less than that of a legal contract of marriage.

But here in the vows, we have the heart of a marriage relationship. The commitment is a part of the whole package- life together, sexual relations, children, responsibilities, shaping the environment for your children to grow up in, sharing life's journey in a spirit of intimacy and togetherness. It isn't boring or predictable because we are all changing all the time, and it takes effort to keep up with the changes and love the marriage partner at every stage of the marriage. The presence of a vow can act as a support when times are difficult. The vows protect because they have been said and freely offered in the joy of love and in the hope and intention of it being a life-long experience. The memory of that can still inspire and renew commitment. When a vow is broken, it can be forgiven and returned to once more in a spirit of reconciliation because the declared love does not disappear when mistakes are made.

There is something wonderful about two young people embarking on the journey of life together and reaching out to the future, as yet unknown, with excitement and anticipation. They have every right to make vows to each other and work on the commitment to stand by them, especially those parts which create the anxiety and doubt which are so corrosive to relationships.