

and in our intellectual development we must, as leaven in the dough, help the world to see that it is God's.

## Sex and the Sacred<sup>1</sup>

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In order to talk theologically about sex, we have to look at the place which sex has in the divine plan, in the revelation of God. It might be imagined that we could explain what God has revealed to us about sex, so that we could compare or contrast it with what Freud or D. H. Lawrence or Dr Kinsey has to say about sex. But this would not be quite accurate: what we want to discover is not what God says about sex, but what sex as interpreted by the Old Testament, by Christ and by the sacraments, has to show us about God.

We may begin with a poem which has been inserted at the very beginning of the Bible. Its opening lines give us the theme of the poem 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' It is to be a poem about what creation means. God is represented as working as a good Hebrew should for six days and resting on the seventh. This is not, of course, because the author thought of God as subject to the Hebrew law, for he is the author of that law; but he wanted to make the point that human life when it stays true to itself by following the law of God is a representation of, a showing forth of, God's activity.

'The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.'

As a prologue we are shown the creative Spirit of God, the breath of God which inspired the heroes and great men of Israel, brooding or hovering over the dark waters to make them fertile. Later, after the coming of Light, the waters are to be divided as the waters of the Red Sea were divided at the creation of the Hebrew people. The image is

<sup>1</sup>The substance of the first of three talks on *Christianity and Sex*, given in Cambridge 1961.

closely related to the Babylonian myth in which mankind is brought forth after the god has conquered and slit open the dragon of the waters. Conquest and fertilization are very closely linked ideas. The plough subdues the earth, conquers it, divides it, and makes it fertile. This remote hint of sexuality at the beginning of the poem prepares the way for a later point. During the ensuing days God prepares the framework of the world, the stage upon which man is to act. On the fifth day he makes animal life and here a significant change takes place. Hitherto God has simply spoken and things have happened: 'God said: let there be light . . . Let there be a vault in the midst of the waters . . .' and so on. Now for the first time he speaks directly to his creatures. Having made the animals 'God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth."'

The suggestion conveyed here is that these higher creatures are in some sense on speaking terms with God; he can speak to them, because in some remote way they are like him, they too give life. They increase and multiply and reflect his great work of creation. The giving of new life, bringing a new living thing into being, is the best image we have of creation. It is not creation, of course, because it takes place as part of a complex causal system, whereas creation starts from nowhere and nothing, but it represents creation to us.

On the final day man is created and with him the resemblance to the creator is no longer merely hinted at, it is explicitly stated:

'Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and the cattle and over all the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and said to them "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion . . ."

It is insistently stressed that man is the image of God and this is associated with two functions. Man is to have dominion over the world, and he is to increase and multiply. In these he mirrors the creative and ruling power of God.

From the beginning God made man male and female. The first thing that is said about man after he has been given the mission of ruling the world is that he is the father of a family, or rather the father and mother of a family. From the beginning God made man and woman. The author insists on this because some of his contemporaries regarded women as a kind of oversight, not intended by God in creation; women

were beings who had not succeeded in being men.

From the beginning therefore, the scriptures make of human sexuality something associated with the image of God in man. This is by no means the whole of the story, but it is the beginning of the story. I have said that the production of new life is the best image we have of creation, but in the production of new human life we have more than an image of creation, we have creation itself. At the very centre of his being man does not depend on any other creatures, but on God alone. This is the root of his freedom and his transcendent dignity, and this is why he alone amongst material things can enter into himself to find God. Other things are simply parts of the world and find their perfection simply in playing their parts in the world, but in the end man's perfection is in himself. No human being owes his deepest self to any other creature; each human life is a unique creation of God. Thus while in other animals new life is the image of creation, in human animals there is not only the image but the reality of creation. The womb of the mother is the scene of a direct and special intervention of God himself. This is the first reason why we believe human sexuality to be especially sacred. There are other and greater reasons still.

The poem we have been considering in the first chapter of Genesis is immediately followed by another story of creation, and here once more the emphasis is on creation as the production of new life. In this story the image is the new life which comes suddenly to the desert at the beginning of the rains. First we see the dry parched desert:

'No plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground.'

Then a spring of water appeared in the waste-land and 'watered the whole face of the ground.' Instantly life begins. The Lord models a man out of clay and breathes into him the breath of life, so that he comes alive, living by the breath of God himself.

This story emphasizes, even more explicitly than the other, that man, because he lives by God's spirit, is the centre of creation, all the rest is made for him. The Lord first of all plants a garden for the man and then he says: 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.' First of all the Lord tries the other animals: 'He formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man . . .' The man gives them their names, organizes them, gives them their jobs in the world. But, the story goes on, this was all right in its way but it was not enough. 'But for the man there was not

found a helper fit for him'. The other animals are merely subject to man, they obey him, he rules them and for this very reason they are not enough; they are simply made of the dust of the earth without the breath of God in them.

Finally the Lord makes woman from the body of man himself, and the man sings:

'This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh  
she shall be called Woman  
because she was taken out of Man.'

'Therefore', the author goes on, 'a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed'.

This last phrase prepares the way for the story that is to follow. So far all is order and clarity. There is a simple hierarchy. First is God, then his creature man living by the breath of God. Next is man's helper, the woman who is made from man himself, so much so that when they are united sexually they become as it were one body. Below woman come the beasts of the field. Everything is idyllic and smoothly organized, there are no agonizing choices, it is a protected world such as we only glimpse for rare moments in the nursery, even the animals are all Peter Rabbit and his friends. It is a charming world and completely unlike the one we live in, though we are constantly tempted to think that with a few extra adjustments our world could be like that. In fact we have a higher task than that of returning to the nursery.

This idyllic world is destroyed by disobedience. The author represents the destruction as an inversion of the hierarchy of the world. Whereas the established order was God, man, woman, beast, now it is the beast, the serpent who persuades the woman, the woman who persuades the man, and the man who disobeys God. The 'natural order' has been overturned and there is a partial return to chaos. In consequence of the breaking of friendship with God disorder appears in human life, elements which ought to be working smoothly together to form an inter-locking pattern now work against each other. It is as though some complex piece of machinery has been dropped on the floor; all the separate little bits are still buzzing away doing their own jobs but these jobs no longer automatically mesh with the functioning of the other bits. Before the fall it was enough for each element in the pattern to look after its own perfection, and it could be taken for granted that this would contribute towards the good of the whole, but now this is

no longer true. It is no longer enough for things to be good in themselves—their relationship to other things has got twisted. There is conflict now not just between good and evil, but between good and good. The woman will desire her husband and yet this will involve the pains of childbirth; the thorns and thistles which like 'every plant yielding seed according to its kind' are good and were made for man, now battle against him in his work.

So the author of this story sees flowing from the fall all the hostilities and fears of the world. The hostility of the animals—'I will put enmity between you and the woman'—the hostility of all nature, the paradoxes and conflicts of sex, the drudgery of work, the new fears and shame that are associated with sex, and finally the fear of death itself, for the breath of life is withdrawn from man and he returns in a short time to dust.

These early tales from Genesis map out the complex place which human sexuality is to have in the divine plan. In the first place sexuality is a blessing from God. Through it man imitates God in creation, in it he reaches a special kind of personal fulfilment, man and woman become two in one flesh. Through the fall, however, it has become a locus of conflict and tragedy. It is significant that the animal chosen to persuade the woman is the serpent which in middle-eastern mythology is the symbol of autonomous sexuality, sexuality operating in isolation from a total human context, sexuality going quietly mad by itself.

The balance of optimism and realism contained in these stories is to be characteristic of the place of sex in divine revelation. Without revelation we usually tend to oversimplify life; there is a strong pressure on men who rely simply upon their human experience to either a fundamental pessimism—sex is at best a necessary evil, the wise man will avoid it if he can—or an unreal optimism which supposes that when you have said that it is good and glorious you have said all that you need to say. These positions express moods or experiences which any adult might have at some particular time, but our faith reminds us of other factors which we must take account of even though they are not obvious to us at the moment.

The isolation of sex from its total human context, which is a result of the fall, is linked very closely with the isolation of the individual from his total communal context. Nothing is more revealing of the false position in which we can so easily place sex than the uncritical use of phrases like 'sexual hunger,' 'sex-starved,' 'sexual appetite'; these phrases have a perfectly good meaning, but they suggest that sex is an appetite alongside and similar to the appetite for food and drink. This can

be very confusing indeed and results from thinking of man outside his true racial context. As a matter of biology the individual needs to eat sometimes or he will go out of existence; he does not need to eat all the time, but sometimes. Eating is therefore a biological necessity for the individual. Sexual activity on the other hand is a biological necessity for the race. If the human race does not have sexual activity in some individuals it will go out of existence; there does not need to be sexual activity in all individuals but there has to be in some. As a matter of sheer biology sex belongs not to the individual as such but to the individual in his relation to the whole human race. If we try to consider man in isolation from this context we shall also consider his sexuality in isolation from the rest of his life, and this is where all the mistakes are waiting to be made.

The fall of man is presented in Genesis as being due to man's attempt to be in absolute control of his own life: 'You shall be as gods,' says the serpent. The rest of the Bible is concerned with the story of the return of man to God and in this story the theme of sexual love has an extremely important part to play. The story opens with Abraham: he is the beginning of salvation, and the essential thing about Abraham is that he has faith. Faith is the very opposite of the first sin. Adam sought to be independent of God; faith on the other hand means recognition of our own inadequacy, a total, unconditional dependence upon God. Abraham as he is presented in the Bible, both in Genesis and in St Paul's epistles is the primordial man of faith—but what was the particular *topic* of his faith? It was this: that his wife Sarah, who was manifestly past the age of child-bearing would have a child. It was through this child and his descendants that the plan of God was to be realised; through him Abraham was to be the father of many nations, through him the world was to be saved once more. But humanly speaking it was impossible that there should be any such child. Nevertheless Abraham believed God, he believed that the barren woman would become fertile by the power of God though this was impossible to human nature. And this is the primordial Hebrew picture of grace. The intervention of God to do what man by his own nature cannot do was seen in concrete terms as a supernatural fertility. There are other such stories in the earlier books of the Old Testament and always their purpose is the same; the hero who is to save his people is born 'not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of man's will, but of God'. The effect of grace is new life in the desert, fruitfulness where there was barrenness.

After the establishment of the kingdom in the promised land we no

longer get stories of the barren woman giving birth but in its place we have the recurring theme of the 'Virgin Israel.' The point of this image is the same as that of the barren woman. Israel is a virgin dedicated to marriage with Yahweh alone. She is not to look for human aid, she is not to make dubious political alliances with the neighbouring pagan states, she is to reserve herself for her marriage with Yahweh. It is Yahweh and not any human power that will make her fertile. The poems of Jeremiah are haunted by a nostalgia for the betrothal of Israel and Yahweh which took place in the desert at the time of the first pasch. Notice that this new creation, the creation of Israel, comes from the waste-land:

'I remember the devotion of your youth,  
your love as a bride,  
How you followed me in the wilderness,  
in a land not sown.  
Israel was holy to the Lord,  
the first fruits of his harvest.' (Jer. 2, 2-3)

Notice the juxtaposition of the desert, the land not sown, and the new life: the first fruits of his harvest.

And in that day, says Yahweh, you will call me 'my husband' and no longer will you call me 'my Lord.' (Hos. 2, 14-16).

Many of the Old Testament poems refer immediately to the contemporary political and religious situation, but they are prophetic poems in that they look beyond the present to the destiny of Israel in God's plan. However dimly the Hebrews themselves may have realized this, Israel had in fact a mission to the whole world which went beyond political terms. To say that the Old Testament is the word of God is to say that what speaks of the destiny of Israel speaks of her destiny in the plan of God and the destiny of Israel is Christ. With the prophets who wrote when the Hebrews were in exile the image of the Virgin Israel takes on a new application. For them the restoration of Israel is seen as the marriage which the virgin is awaiting. A poem in the Book of Isaiah says

'You shall no more be termed Forsaken,  
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;  
But you shall be called "My delight in her"  
and your land shall be called "Married".  
. . . and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride  
so shall your God rejoice over you.' (Is. 62, 4-5).

What is looked forward to, then, is a new marriage between Israel and Yahweh. Sometimes the Messiah is seen as the fruit of the supernatural

fertility of this union: as in the famous passage in Isaiah 'Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name "God with us,"' or again the picture of the Servant as a plant growing out of barren ground. Sometimes on the other hand the messianic king, as in psalm 44, is seen as the husband and Israel as the bride. Each of these themes is taken up and fulfilled in the New Testament.

The restoration of Israel, the fulfilment of her destiny was seen as the marriage of the virgin Israel with Yahweh, the messianic age was to be the marriage feast, the sacred meal associated with the marriage of Israel and God. This is the background to the story of the virgin birth of Christ in St Matthew and St Luke. The Virgin Mary represents and sums up the virgin Israel, in her the prophecies are fulfilled.

'The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the Power of the Most High shall overshadow thee. Therefore the Holy One that will be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.'

Mary is the bride of Yahweh who brings forth salvation without the power of man. In her the mission of Israel to bring together mankind and God is brought to fulfilment.

We should completely misunderstand the significance of Mary's virginity in the divine plan if we thought of it in terms of sterility. The whole point of it is that it involves a divine fertility, a marriage with God. It would also be a mistake to see her virginity as we can and do see the virginity of others, as only a renunciation, a form of asceticism. Renunciation belongs to the interim period between Christ's first and second coming. Mary's perpetual virginity is not a renunciation but the eschatological fulfilment of sexuality such as the just will enjoy after the resurrection. In his own birth Christ, then, is seen as the hero born of the marriage of Yahweh with the virgin Israel, but he is also more commonly seen as the bridegroom and the new Israel as his bride. One of the first messianic titles he takes to himself is that of the bridegroom. He is asked why it is that the disciples of John and the pharisees fast, while his disciples do not. He says 'Do the companions of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them?' He is the bridegroom and his presence is the messianic feast. St Mark follows this immediately with the story of the disciples plucking ears of wheat on the sabbath—another image of the sacred nuptial meal. In St John's gospel Christ's first sign takes place in the context of the marriage feast and Christ himself constantly compares his coming to a royal wedding feast, e.g., in the parables of the wedding feast, the wise and foolish virgins, the king's son. As Messiah he is the bridegroom come to wed the faithful, the Church.



As the Apocalypse puts it:

'One of the seven Angels said: Come and I will show you the bride, the wife of the lamb. And he took me up in spirit to a great and high mountain and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.' (Apoc. 21, 9-10).

In Genesis we have seen marriage as a reflection, an image of divine creativeness, and in these later passages we see how it is used by God as an image of his redemptive love for mankind. We find this theme explicitly developed in its final form in the famous passage in the Epistle to the Ephesians (5, 25-32).

'Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church.

He delivered himself up for her.'

All human love must involve a sacrifice of oneself, and in Christian marriage this sacrifice is sacramentally united to Christ's sacrifice by which he delivered himself up for the Church.

We may ask what it is about the love of husband and wife that makes it so suitable an image of the love of Christ for his Church, or which made it such a suitable image of the love of Yahweh for Israel. In the first place, it is a total and unconditional love, which does not hold anything back. It is a sacrificial love, a giving of oneself. The love of man and wife is not always of this kind, but this is how marriage is to be in the revelation of God and by entering into the revelation of God this is what marriage can become. For the revelation of God is not just information; it does not for example simply tell us what an ideal marriage ought to be like—this would be very cold comfort. Revelation is a life which we lead, a world in which we live. It is a new creation which we enter in entering the sacramental life of the Church. Being married for the Christian means sharing the sacramental life in a special way.

In the second place, marriage makes a suitable image of the love of Christ for his Church because it is a union; the Church is the body of Christ as the wife's body is her husband's. The wife does not belong to the husband as something he owns, any more than his own body does; she belongs to him as his body, and the same of course is true of the husband—he belongs in this way to his wife. The husband can say of his wife, not 'this belongs to me,' not 'this body is mine,' but 'this is my body,' for they are two in one flesh. And this is what Christ says of his Church. Over the bread and wine which as offerings of the Church symbolize the Church itself offered to the Father, he says 'This is my body.' This does not mean that the Church and Christ are one person,

any more than husband and wife become one person. The union of marriage in the kingdom of God is no threat to the personal integrity of each partner. On the contrary the personality of each is reaffirmed by his gift of himself to the other. But they are two who share a common life as Christ and the Church share a common life which is the Spirit of God, divine love.

What I have been trying to do is to show the place which sex and marriage have in the divine plan as means by which God is revealed to us. This is only half of the subject and less than half of what the scriptures have to say about the topic. We also have to consider sex in relation to our attainment of God, to locate sexual love in the broader context of the divine life of love in us. We have in fact to consider the moral theology of sex. By recognising marriage as one of the sacraments of Christ, Christianity asserts both that it shows us Christ and that it is a way of being incorporated in him, and we shall have to see what this means in practice.<sup>2</sup> Sexual love is thus an opportunity for sanctity, but since every such opportunity can be the occasion of failure we must also be concerned with the ways in which sex and marriage are affected by the disorders consequent upon the fall, and in particular with the dehumanizing of sex by which it loses touch with the rest of human life and carries on an autonomous life of its own.

Sex for the Christian is sacred in a quite technical sense, it is something which contains and shows forth the creative power of God, and sex in marriage is more sacred still since it contains and shows forth the redeeming love of God. But to be sacred means first of all to be dangerous. It can mean much more, but it first means this: 'No man can look upon God and live.' If we profane the sacred we shall be destroyed by it. This is the inner meaning of the taboos with which sex is surrounded: they are expressions or began as expressions of the reverence and fear which is proper in the presence of something sacred. Of course other people's taboos always look ridiculous and in a rapidly changing world, the last generation but one is already 'other people,' their taboos are foreign to us and are apt to look absurd. This does not matter—it is not the nature of the taboo that counts—but there would be I think something seriously wrong with a society which did not have any taboos about sex. It is not dangerous because it is bad, it is dangerous because it is sacred, powerful, capable if it is divorced from the world of love of destroying the personality as effectively as a drug, and equally cap-

<sup>2</sup>These topics were dealt with in the two following lectures which are shortly to be published in *Blackfriars*.

able of bringing us, through the power of Christ's passion, to eternal union with God.

## St John the Baptist and the Desert

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The traditions about the birth of St John the Baptist enshrined in St Luke's gospel would appear to have come from a Hebrew source, and they correspond to a literary type, we might almost say a theme, which recurs in the Old Testament. John, or 'the Lord gives grace' was a child of divine promise, born of aged parents against all expectation. The scriptures had already told how Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah, and told too of how an angel appeared to announce the birth of Samson. Whereupon Samuel was born in answer to prayer, to put an end to a would-be mother's anguish, and above all to be a prophet in the great designs of God. Jeremiah, we read, was sanctified from his mother's womb. All this, and more, in the scriptures prepared for, and pointed to, the precursor and herald of the saviour. And then the story of the Baptist's birth came to be intertwined with that of the saviour himself; partly to show the greatness of John, partly to bring out the contrast between precursor and saviour, for John 'was not himself the light but to give evidence of the light' (John 1. 8).

Now, familiar gospel stories can often leave us wondering. Thus we can note in Luke 1. 80: 'the child grew and became strong in spirit; *and he lived in the deserts* until the day he was manifested to Israel'. Why should the son of Zachary, a true Sadducee of priestly family, who was intent upon temple services and served in his due turn—why should the son of such a man live *in the deserts*, and seemingly not follow in his father's footsteps, and apparently show no interest in temple worship? These and like questions serve to show that there is something unusual and mysterious about the early days of the Baptist. Besides this, not only