

Five Talks on Marriage
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I

Marriage and the Eucharist

The two sacraments of Marriage and the Eucharist are connected with one another very closely. Both are sacraments, not only of unity but of oneness. Both are images, premonitions of the things to come, when dividedness, separation will have been overcome. Both have already on earth a completeness that already belongs to the eschatological realm. And yet both lack something, because it is only when all things will be fulfilled that the oneness, however great our union with God or our union with one another is, will reach its plenitude.

Speaking of the Eucharist, the Communion between man and God, a prayer of the Liturgy says: 'And grant us, O Lord, to commune more perfectly, more fully with thee in the Age to Come'. So that even these sacraments, which are such an incredible, unthinkable, unfathomable union between God and man, are incomplete and only a foretaste of things to come. All the more, the sacrament of marriage.

Of this sacrament, or rather of the mystery of marriage, there is a passage in one of the manuscripts of the Gospel that says: "The Lord was asked "When shall the Kingdom of God come?" and he replied: "The Kingdom of God has already come when two are no longer two, but one". And yet again we know that the Kingdom, as we experience it now in our historical flow of time, is only in becoming, that the Kingdom is like the light that shines in the darkness which the darkness is incapable of quenching and which yet it does not receive. And the link between these two sacraments goes very deep, because it is not only the spiritual unity or the psychological harmony between man and woman, but even their physical harmony and oneness which is seen by certain of the spiritual writers of old as parallel to the mystery of God's union with his creatures in the sacrament of Communion. One of the writers of old could say that the physical love of husband and wife could be an image and simile to the way in which Christ unites himself with his creatures.

So the two sacraments are closely linked with each other and can be understood only if we see the one reflected in the other and if we remember this balance - or is it an unbalance - which makes one eschatological event into an event in which the things of the age to come are already disclosed to us and also experienced by us, but with all the limitations of a world which still lies in sin, of a world which has not yet opened itself up to the plenitude of communion with God.

And when we speak of the sacrament of marriage, there is another context in which we must set it. It is the context of monasticism or, if you prefer, - to cover a wider and more complex ground - of dedicated, consecrated celibacy. When you think of the monastic profession and of the relationship that exists between husband and wife, you may well not be struck by the analogy. And yet fundamentally there are parallels as well as a sharp divide. And let me say a word first about the sharp divide.

The sharp divide does not consist in the fact that consecrated celibacy, the

monastic profession, places a woman or man in total aloneness face to face with God. For this aloneness on a human level is fulfilled, acquires a total meaning in the oneness which the person experiences with God and - and this is very important – **in** God with all the created beings. So the monastic profession is not a situation in which, having renounced to be enslaved to earthly things, a human being is made alien to the world, but a situation in which, having refused enslavement, entanglement, a human being roots himself in God, and **in** God finds again the whole creation which he seemingly had forsaken.

I want to dwell on this point because it has direct relevance to the subject of marriage, for us to understand the context. The word 'monk' comes from a Greek word which means aloneness. But it also means not only aloneness but wholeness. It is a unified person who stands in this unified condition before the Holy One who is oneness itself and communes with him within this oneness, possessed to perfection, fully, by the living God, One in Three Persons, and shared with a human being whose powers are all made one in a harmony, the key of which is communion with God. But on the other hand, a communion with the God of love, the God who has given his only-begotten Son so that a world that has betrayed him may be saved, cannot alienate the person to that world which God not only willed but loved into existence and for which he gave his life.

There is an illustration which I think is worth mentioning, of this balance between what Theophan the Recluse says of the monk: 'a living soul and her God, that that is all there is to the monk or the nun' and what I said. In Father Sophrony's book *The Undistorted Image*, or in one of the two halves published separately afterwards, there is a story concerning Silouan.

Silouan was in charge of a workshop. To the surprise of other supervisors, those committed to his charge worked hard, honestly, without trying to skip their work, while in other workshops, in spite of severe supervision, the work was not done as conscientiously, as lovingly and responsibly. And once again, sitting at table at a meal they asked Silouan how he managed. And Silouan answered and said something to this effect, that long before the young men, who had come from all the corners of Russia, assembled for the work, he was up, and having prayed the usual prayers, he turned to praying for each of them and all of them. And then when the time had come, he went into the workshop and looked at them with his heart full of compassion and love for them and deep concern for them, because these were young Russian peasants, come from all corners of the vast Russian empire, who had left behind their families, their villages, because they were too poor to subsist and to keep their own loved ones. They had come there to work for a year, two years, three years perhaps, in order to collect a little money and be able to return to support their families better than they could before. And so he looked at them with concern, because they were lonely, they were in a strange land, they were afraid for their families, and being illiterate as well as this, they could not even correspond with them.

And so, said Silouan, he distributed to each of them some of the work, trying to apportion it according to their gifts, to their strength, to what he saw of their eagerness or their sadness. And then, having done this, he went to his cell, and all the hours during which they would work he prayed for them.

And he describes the way he did it. He took his stand before God and said to him: Lord, remember Nikita, Michael, or whoever, remember his family, he has left behind a young wife, a newborn child. How sad his heart must be. How worried he is for

them. How desperate must have been their poverty, for him to abandon them to their destiny and to the charity of others and to the mercy of God. And he said he prayed and prayed for this man, for that woman, for that child, for their village, and as he prayed more and more deeply with an ever-increasing compassion and love, the presence of God, the sense of God became increasingly overwhelming for him, and at a certain moment the sense of God prevailed over everything and he forgot the young workman and his family and his village and was carried as though it was on a tumultuous stream, as he puts it, into the depth of God. And there, at the heart of divine love, he found the young workman, his young wife, their child, their village, held, loved by God. And as it were on a returning tide he came back to earth full of compassion, of love, of concern and of prayer, but it was now God's own love and compassion and concern and intercession which he offered him. And so he went on.

This, I think, is a very important thing to remember, that consecrated celibacy is not alienation from the world but another way of approaching it, from within God together with him in another relationship.

And I remember also my spiritual father telling me of a novice from the monastery of Valaam whom he had met when he himself was undecided whether he would become a monk or return to preach the Gospel in the world. He met this man on one of the islands in a small hermitage. He had been a novice for fifty years and never accepted to be professed a monk. He had worked hard, lost an arm, lost a leg because a tree had fallen on him when he was lumbering for the monastery. And he said to him: 'But why, why after all these years have you not become a monk?' And the answer came from this simple novice Nicholas: 'A monk is one who cries in compassion for the whole world. I have not yet learned compassion.'

These things I mention to you because it is important for us to realise that however different the ways are, the outer conditions in which Christians of different vocations live, basically they must fulfil the two commandments which the Lord Jesus Christ has given, to love one's God with all one's heart, all one's mind, all one's soul and all one's strength, and one's neighbour as oneself. Those two commandments are equal to each other although the one would crumble to dust if the other one was not fulfilled. There could be no true love for one's neighbour on the scale to which we are called if it was not God's love and if this love were not on God's scale.

And yet there are two streams of life: the celibate and the married one. Nothing in the Church can exist which does not express the very being, the substance, the life of the Church. And when I speak of the Church, I do not mean our earthly community with its imperfections, but **the** Church in which we believe, which is the substance and the life power of the Church in which we live. And if one can say - and this is the imagery which we found throughout the Old and the New Testaments, in all the patristic writings and the liturgical sequences - if one can say that marriage is an image, an icon, however imperfect because it is earthly, of the banquet of the Lamb, of the Kingdom fulfilled, of all things being one with God and in God, one can also say that the monastic renunciation, the readiness in a world where connectedness, solidarity, unity and oneness are so essential for survival both spiritual and physical - that this renunciation is an image of the loneliness of Christ, the loneliness of God become man, and is an image also of the way, the ascent to the cross, the bride, of which St Peter speaks in one of his epistles, the bride of the Lamb, the sacrificial lamb, the Lamb who is offered and slain for the sins of

the world, beloved, recognised and followed by his creatures, as the Scripture puts it, whithersoever he goes, following him from the humiliation of the incarnation into the defenceless, the vulnerable condition which he has chosen, accepting never to be understood, accepting always to be a stranger, accepting always somehow to be not only a challenge but an offence, accepting rejection ultimately.

But again, one must be careful not to draw contrasts which are unreal in the twilight of history, in the twilight of the human situation, because in the loneliness and the way of the cross which dedicated celibacy implies, there is also a mystery of union with God which is already that fulfilment which each of us longs for at the end of time. And if we cast a look at the married condition again, it is not yet **that** fulfilment which we expect at the end of time. Like the Eucharist, there are still greater things to be revealed and experienced. There is an ascetic element, a severe element in the mystery of marriage as there is a glorious moment in the mystery of the dedicated celibacy, because on earth since the incarnation, the resurrection and the glorious ascension of our Lord, our Saviour, our God Jesus Christ, the cross and the resurrection can never be separated from one another. The cross shines with the light of the resurrection and the resurrection, we know, has followed the darkness of Calvary. The two are intertwined. And here again we find the same image, the image of the light that shines in darkness which the darkness cannot comprehend but which the darkness cannot quench either.

And the parallel now can be pursued, because if both the consecrated celibacy in its extreme historical form, the monastic profession, and the married estate are the two sides of the same coin, a vision from two different angles of the mystery of the Church and ultimately of the mystery of Christ in history and in eternity simultaneously, then perhaps we can learn something about the married estate from the monastic vows. In Orthodoxy someone who becomes a monk or a nun professes, strictly speaking, only one vow, that of stability. The other undertakings of poverty, chastity, obedience are ways in which this stability is realised. The stability which one professes **does** imply historically the undertaking not to leave one's own community or one's own monastery otherwise than by command. But more basically, more essentially, this vow of stability is a declaration that my heart is bent on finding God, that if it were to cost me my life, I will not move from this place until the Lord give me his blessing.

In a way the image which comes to my mind is the fight of Jacob with the angel in the darkness of night, a fight in the darkness, when Jacob does not know whom he is fighting, and when the light dawns he recognises the angel of God and asks him to bless him. Stability is that attitude, that will take hold of God and fight in the darkness, that will stand before the door and knock, that will wait at whatever cost and be prepared to pay the cost because it is worth losing all one's possessions to acquire the one precious pearl, to use the Gospel's idiom. But this stability is a faithfulness. It is rooted in trust that however long the expectation, however arduous the struggle, God, who is faithful, will respond, and faithfulness to one's purpose is a response to God's own faithfulness. But isn't the very root of any human relationship, but supremely of a marriage relationship, the faithfulness of the two to one another, the readiness at all costs to remain at one, to struggle through all barriers, to overcome all separations, to stand and knock until the door opens - a stability of purpose, a determination that nothing will shake? And so there is this first analogy of the two roads, of the two forms of life. And if you remember what I said about the way in which a balance is held between the first and the

second commandment, this balance is held here and there in the same manner.

And then poverty, the poverty of the first Beatitude: I am nothing. I possess nothing. I mean nothing except what I mean to God and to human love, except what I am given by divine love and by human love, except what I am through love divine and human - this miracle that one is nothing, one has nothing and yet that one possesses all things because one is loved. We are saved because we are loved. Our value is not intrinsic. Our value is measured by the love which is attached to us. Our value is infinite, because divine love, infinite, is given us and because finite, human love, but a love that expands through Communion with God to infinity, is also given us.

And perhaps we will come back to this when we speak of the service of marriage. It is important to realise that the balance between giving and receiving is immensely important. God does not treat us only as receptacles of his love. He calls us to be companions, friends, co-workers. And this applies supremely perhaps, to the relationship between husband and wife in themselves and in God.

And then chastity. We tend to think of chastity only in physical terms and we miss the point so completely. When we pray in the service of marriage that the relationship between husband and wife may remain chaste, we think of something which is far greater than the quality, the sobriety, the purity of the way in which they treat one another's bodies. What we pray for, what chastity is, begins at the moment when a person can see another person simultaneously in his or her ultimate, perfect and glorious otherness, and worshipfully, reverently, dedicate himself or herself to the care of this person to a caring, understanding, reverent love. When we discover that our neighbour, each neighbour- not only those whom we love in a unique or in a more particular way - that every one was created by God and has got an eternal destiny and is connected to God in a way unique, unrepeatable, that God has for him a name which expresses him or her totally, and that this name is the mark of a unique relationship, of a unique communion. And at the same time, having discovered the greatness, the holiness, virtual, potential, of the other person, that we undertake to serve this person in God, to become, yes, in relationship to both, the friend of the bridegroom, the one that cares for the fulfilment of love between the two. Chastity begins at that moment when a person ceases to be a prey, ceases to be an object, ceases to be part of our environment and acquires an ultimate independence from us, and when the relationship that can exist between two persons is the relationship of true freedom.

And then obedience. Obedience is so different from military drill, from subservience, from subjection. The word obedience comes from a Latin word that means to listen, to lend an ear. And whether we relate to God or to one, another person, obedience is at the very heart of every relationship, of all encounter - to listen, to be open, to attempt with all one's energies, to understand. This is what one pursues in all one's spiritual life. The way in which, when we read the spiritual writers of old and of modern times we are told that we must break our own will, cut it off, become free of all forms of self will, is only a school; it is a way of being in harmony and open to a greater will than ours, but not in subjection, not in fear and submission but in the freedom of a gift of self in the mystery of a love relationship which is the fulfilment of both, because, as St Maxim the Confessor says, God can do everything save one: he can force no one to love, because love is a perfect freedom.

And so we see that whether we choose dedicated, consecrated celibacy or the

married life, we are expressing in our lives the mystery of the Church in relation to God and to all those who are in God. And although the two ways imply obviously what one would call in modern terms a different style of life, it remains that the essence of things is one and the same.

I have dwelt on these various elements at length today because it is important for us to understand how they relate, and how the Church, the life of God in our midst, finds expression in the two alternatives. I will only add one word, that of the two, the Church considers marriage as a sacrament and has never defined the monastic profession as one. I think that the reason for it is that marriage is an image not of the tragic destiny of Christ on earth, but is an image, an icon of the kingdom which is to come. It has an eschatological dimension. It is a promise and it is a vision. And this is why it was singled out in the line of the Eucharist to belong together with it. And there was a time when the Orthodox Church had no independent service of marriage, but marriage was formalized by a public declaration and made into a sacramental event through bride and bridegroom receiving Communion together. In Greece an attempt has been made recently to celebrate the marriage service as part of the Eucharist, of the Divine Liturgy, and to that I will come next time when I speak more particularly of the service of marriage.

II HOLY MATRIMONY

Today we continue our talks on the sacraments. We have come to describing the rite of Holy Matrimony, of Marriage. I will try tonight to present you with the service as it stands in the Orthodox Church, and we will have to continue on this subject in the next season in the autumn, because there are many questions that should be touched upon and if possible resolved concerning marriage and human relationships within it.

You possibly remember that I said last time that in contrast with the monastic profession, dedicated, consecrated celibacy, which is not considered as a sacrament, marriage from the very beginning was defined as such by the Church. And the reason I gave for it was that the monastic profession of dedicated celibacy is, by an act of the will, of determination, a personal and free choice, the undertaking to follow the road of the cross, to follow Christ to his passion, to the garden on the Mount of Olives and the agony, and to the cross. I have also underlined the fact that although the monastic road is exemplified by the way of the cross, it would be an illusion to imagine that it has all the stern, stark darkness and tragic quality of Christ's ascent to the cross, because since the Resurrection, the cross of Christ stands against the background of the eternal, uncreated light of victory. And so the way which the consecrated celibacy represents is a way which is following Christ through all his tragic destiny, but at the same time filled, protected, surrounded by the eternal light and victory which Christ has won.

On the other hand, marriage is a sacrament because it is an image, an icon - and more than an icon - a realisation, however incomplete, as all things are on earth, of the mystery of the kingdom, the banquet of the Lamb, the unity of two in God through him between themselves. But if you remember what Christ said of the kingdom, that the kingdom is to be conquered by force, and only those who are prepared to do violence to themselves are fit to enter into it, if you remember that the way into the kingdom which is offered to every Christian without exception, is defined in the clear, simple words of

Christ: "Deny thyself, turn away from thyself, take up thy cross and follow me"- then a sort of balance is restored between these two ways. This experience of the kingdom already come with power is marked also by the sign of the cross.

Now in early days in Constantinople up to the ninth century there was no separate rite of marriage. There was a public declaration which was a civil, social, public act of it and there was the taking part of bride and bridegroom in Holy Communion together. Later a service of marriage was gradually devised because probably two things were felt, that Holy Communion, the mystery of the Eucharist, was more universal, vaster, greater than the event that took place in the lives of two persons and the community involved in it, and also that there was a great deal that should be conveyed to those who were to be married through the liturgical form of the marriage, which could not possibly be done adequately within the Liturgy.

So we will go into the service of marriage as it stands now. And first of all, a thing which is important for us to remember is that the service of marriage as we take it in all Orthodox churches nowadays is practically always made of two services which were meant to take place separately: first a betrothal service which was to be taken when two persons were engaged to one another - and this engagement usually lasted for a long time - but the engagement was already binding. It was not simply a tentative agreement; it was an act, conscious, thought out, for two persons to enter into a new relationship. This service of the betrothal took place months - at times more than months - before the marriage service itself. And it was not simply a social event. It was an event whereby God in the Church established a new relationship between two persons that had to be experienced, thought out, lived and mature to the point when the service of the crowning, the fulfilment of the marriage would be accomplished.

There is also a last feature which we never observe nowadays. At the end of the service, after the crowning, the crowns are removed and put aside with special prayers. In the early Church this removal of the crowns took place a whole week after the service - not to say that bride and bridegroom spent eight days wearing their crowns day and night - but that this crowning having taken place, there was a period of eight days when bride and bridegroom continued to live as married people in virginity, and it is at the fulfilment of these eight days that these crowns were removed, and, as one of the prayers says, stored, as it were, in heaven for them to receive them when they had fought the good fight and earned them with a life that was worthy of the kingdom, the icon of which they had become.

I remind you of a phrase which I quoted to you last time of an old manuscript of the Gospel in which the Lord was asked 'When shall the kingdom of God come?' and his answer was 'The kingdom has already come when two are no longer two but one.' Let us go through the service so that you will have a scheme of it and a few indications of what it is meant to convey, and then in the next season we will go deeper into the meaning of things.

First of all we will take it as it is practised nowadays, the betrothal service simply preceding the marriage service proper, the crowning. Bride and Bridegroom, according to Orthodox custom are supposed not to meet on that day but prepare themselves by praying and by thinking of the event which is to take place. The bridegroom comes first to the church and is met by the choir which sings an appropriate troparion, either the troparion of the feast or of the day or any of the greeting troparia

which we possess. And then the bride comes, brought either by her father or someone who takes his place and stands next to the bridegroom. They stand exactly in the same way in which the icons are placed before them on the holy screen. In other words, the bridegroom stands on this side facing the icon of Christ and the bride stands on that side facing the Mother of God.

The priest comes up to them and blesses them with the sign of the cross and gives them lighted toppers, lighted candles. As we take this service as a whole, we always transfer two questions which are asked at the marriage service to the beginning of the betrothal. These questions are: 'Hast thou a good, free and unconstrained will and a firm intention to take unto thyself to wife this woman whom thou seest before thee? Thou hast not promised thyself to any other bride?' And the same question is asked of the bride. This was, in a way, a declaration of the freedom of the kingdom. One does not enter into the mystery of God, into the kingdom of love which is perfect freedom, otherwise than with unconstrained, free and good will. But also it was a moment when a bride compelled to marry a man against her will, could, in the last resort, say no, with whatever consequences might happen afterwards when she went home.

And then a second element in it is a firm intention, This firm intention refers to what I mentioned before. This kingdom is taken by force. It is not a smooth and simple way. It is a good fight to be fought in a relationship both to God and to the bridegroom.

And then usually, instead of giving the candles to the bride and bridegroom without a word, simply blessing them with them, the priest says, 'May your light so shine before all men that, seeing your good works, they give glory to your Father who is in heaven.' And turning towards the sanctuary, he gives a first blessing: 'Blessed is our Lord.' And a litany follows in which we pray for the servant of God and the handmaid of God who now plight each other their troth and for their salvation, that God will send down upon them perfect and peaceful love and his help, that he will preserve them in oneness of mind and in steadfast faith, bless them with blameless life and honourable marriage, pure and undefiled. Deliver them from all tribulation, wrath, necessity or violence, and that they may be granted children and the fulfilment of all their petitions which are for their good unto salvation.

The first words are important: 'They now plight each other their troth.' They promise each other their mutual faithfulness. They promise one another stability in their intent and determination to achieve what is a way of the cross in its own manner, and we pray for them that God would give them perfect, peaceful love and his help, without which love can never achieve perfection, can never be perfect peace and harmony; that God will preserve them in oneness of mind and in steadfast faith. And this faith, I believe, is not only faith in God, which is the foundation and the stronghold of their relationship, but faith in one another, faith understood in all that it means: trust, and a trust so strong, so perfect that it can stand the test of all the problems of life; faith as faithfulness to one another, to one's own self, to one's work, to one's God, out of which alone can come the blameless life, the honourable marriage, pure and undefiled.

And this litany is concluded by a prayer from the priest who says: 'O eternal God, who hast brought into unity those who were sundered, and hast ordained for them an indissoluble bond of love, who didst bless Isaac and Rebecca, and didst make them heirs of thy promise: Bless also these thy servants, guiding them unto every good work.' The bond of love, indissoluble: this is what we pray for first of all for bride and

bridegroom. And then mention is made here especially of Isaac and Rebecca. You remember probably that in the Old Testament Abraham sent his servant into Mesopotamia, his land of origin, to find a bride for his son Isaac. And God revealed to his servant whom he should betroth for Isaac by the sign of the pitcher. Rebecca was the God-chosen and the God-given bride of Isaac. And we pray that this bride and bridegroom should be for one another the God-chosen and the God-given, not people chosen for earthly, secular reasons, but people to whom love, and a love steady and eternal, would have revealed that this was the only person in the world that would be their wife.

And then a second prayer: 'O Lord our God who hast espoused the Church as a pure Virgin from among the Gentiles: Bless this Betrothal, unite and maintain these thy servants in peace and oneness of mind.' And here again there is a feature which I believe is important: God who has espoused the Church as a pure Virgin. It is because God loves mankind, because God has given his heart to his creation, that this creation of his can stand before him purified by this love, because neither any of us nor all the creation of God can claim to be virgin and pure, capable of entering into this love relationship with God whom our Liturgy spoke of as the Lover of Mankind. And so also it reminds us that in a marriage it is the mutual love of bride and bridegroom, of husband and wife, that will make the other worthy, and not the other way around.

And then comes the exchange of rings. The priest takes the two rings which were prepared and had been lying on the Holy Table during the preceding. Liturgy, blessed for them, and blessing in turns the man and the woman, the priest says; 'The servant of God is betrothed to the handmaid of God in the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' And the same is said the other way round.

Now I would like to draw your attention to the words 'in the Name.' We use them lightly. We use them as a liturgical phrase. But the Name in Hebrew tradition meant the essential reality of a person or of a created being. 'In the Name of God' means that this act is done from within the depth of the divine wisdom. It is not to be understood in the same sense in which we say that some person is acting in another person's name, that is, as a locum, as someone else who only represents it. It means that the act is performed from the depth of the divine essence and power.

And then again a prayer in which we remember Isaac and Rebecca again, the way in which God gave them to each other, asking God to make firm the word, the promise, or rather the word of love which they have pronounced, that he would establish them in a holy union which is from him and that he should, in this exchange of rings, fulfil in them and for them what was fulfilled of old for others. By a ring was power given to Joseph in Egypt. He was a refugee. He was a man who had come as a stranger, and God gave him power in the land. And it was the ring which was given him by the Pharaoh that established him over all the country. 'By a ring was Daniel glorified in the land of Babylon; by a ring was the uprightness of Tamar revealed; by a ring did our heavenly Father show forth his bounty upon his Son' and 'by the word of thy truth were the heavens established, and the foundations of the earth were made firm; bless the hands of thy servants by thy mighty blessing and make them strong by thine upraised hand. Bless this putting-on of rings with Thy heavenly blessing: and let Thine Angel go before them all the days of their life. ' And this is the end of the betrothal.

After this in the past or on occasions where the two services are taken

separately, bride and bridegroom leave the place and go back to their respective houses in a new relationship to ponder over what was offered them by the prayers of the Church - all that I underlined a moment ago.

More often than not this betrothal service is followed by the crowning. The priest, who has taken the service at the rear of the church, comes now, together with the bride and bridegroom, to the centre. In the centre of the church stands a desk with a Book of the Gospel and a crucifix: The Book of the Gospel, which is God's Word and also the living icon of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the crucifix, which is his act of sacrificial love unto our salvation.

While they move towards the centre of the Church, the priest proclaims 'Glory to thee, O God, glory to thee.' And then verses from a psalm are read: 'Blessed are they that fear the Lord., all they who walk in his paths...O blessed art thou, and happy shalt thou be. Thy wife shall be as the fruitful vine upon the walls of thine house, thy children like a newly-planted olive-orchard round about thy table. Lo, thus shall the man be blessed that feareth the Lord.'

And then the priest proclaims a blessing which is characteristic of all the events in the Church which are already entering into the Kingdom in anticipation of the glorious end. 'Blessed is the Kingdom.' And a short litany again 'for the servants of God who are now being united to each other in the community of marriage... that he will bless this marriage, as he blessed that in Cana of Galilee, that he will grant unto them chastity' and children, 'that he will make them glad with the sight of sons and daughters', that he will fulfill all their petitions which are for their good.

And then a series of prayers in which images of the Old Testament are presented to us: the story of those who, up to the birth of Christ, could be to us images of mutual love, of faithfulness and of true worship of God in their unity. 'O God most pure, the Creator of every living thing' is the beginning. Then towards the middle of this prayer: thou 'who from the root of Jesse according to the flesh, didst bud forth the ever-Virgin One, and wast incarnate of her; and wast born for the redemption of the human race; who, through thine unutterable gift of mercy and goodness didst come to Cana of Galilee, and didst bless the marriage there, that thou mightest make manifest that it is thy will that there should be lawful marriage and the begetting of children: Do thou, the same all-holy Master accept our prayers. As thou wast present there, so likewise be thou present here, with thine invisible protection. Bless this marriage, and vouchsafe unto these thy servants a peaceful life, length of days, chastity, integrity, mutual love in the bond of peace, long-lived seed, gratitude from their posterity, a crown of glory which fadeth not away. Graciously grant that they may behold their children's children. Preserve their marriage unassailed. Give them of the dew of heaven from on high and the fatness of the earth. Fill their houses with wheat, and wine, and oil, and with every good thing, that they may also bestow in turn upon those who are in need; granting also unto those who are here present with them all their petitions which are for their salvation.'

And a second prayer: 'O Lord our God, the priest of the mystical and pure marriage, the Ordainer of the law of the marriage of the body, the Preserver of immortality, the Provider of all good things...' And in this prayer we ask God to bless this bride and bridegroom as he blessed Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and all the patriarchs, Joseph and Asenath, Moses and Sepphora, Joachim and Anna, Zacharias and Elizabeth, and preserve them against all evil. Remember them as he did remember

the holy ones of old, and remember also the parents who have brought them up; for the prayers of parents make firm the foundations of houses. Grant them comfort of soul and body. Give them all the things of the earth and grant them that one day 'obtaining favour in thy sight, they may shine like the stars of heaven, in thee, Our God.' This is probably a reminder of the words of St Paul that our life is hid with Christ in God. We are already there because Christ is already there, and if our unity with each other is in him, so is already our eternity there.

And then the crowning comes. It is either crowns of flowers, or, in the Russian Church, metal crowns - gold crowns they are supposed to be - and the words are: 'The servant of God, or the handmaid of God, is crowned unto the handmaid or the servant of God in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.' This crowning has three parallel meanings. On the one hand, in olden times when people met together for a feast they came crowned with flowers. It meant festivity. It meant joy. It meant a respite in the dreariness or the fearfulness of life. It was an island of peace. On the other hand, in the ancient Church bride and bridegroom were called king and queen. And this explains itself in the following way. In ancient society, both Roman and Greek, as long as a man or a woman were not married, they were a part of the family into which they had been born. They were under the complete authority of the father of the family. When they got married they became, as it were, in their own right a sovereign state. You may remember also that in ancient times a city was a confederation of sovereign families. What came first was the family and its union with other families, not a city as an entity in itself. And so the marriage was, from the point of view of the city, the establishment of a new unit which would have sovereign rights. And bride and bridegroom were now the sovereigns - and all there was at that moment of the new sovereign state.

And lastly, these crowns, as one can see from the rest of the service, represent the crowns which will be given to the bride and bridegroom if they are worthy of the love which they have proclaimed, declared to one another in faithfulness, in purity, and, having fought the good fight, they will receive them in the Kingdom of God.

And then there are two readings preceded by a prophetic gradual. Before that the priest blesses bride and bridegroom with the words 'O Lord our God, crown them with glory and honour.' And then the Gradual: 'Thou has set upon their heads crowns of precious stones; they asked life of thee, and thou gavest it them.'

Bride and bridegroom have now entered into a new dimension of life. It is no longer their individual lives. It is a life which is suprapersonal, where it is the life of two persons in one personality, as it were. The words are not mine, however awkward they sound; they belong to Schopenhauer, who says that in marriage one personality in two persons is established.

And the next verse is: 'Thou wilt give them thy blessing for ever and ever; thou wilt make them to rejoice with gladness through thy presence'. And then a reading from St Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, which I will not analyze now, because it would take too long, and a reading from the Gospel, the story of Cana in Galilee. These two texts I would like to analyse when we meet again in the autumn in the whole context of what marriage represents in other ways.

The Lord's Prayer is read after a short litany, and then come two things: the blessing of the common cup and the procession, the threefold procession, round the Book of the Gospel. The cup, in ancient times - indeed I suppose nowadays also - is an image

of one's destiny, to drink one's cup to the dregs, to drink one's cup as the Lord Christ said, means to drink deep all that God has prepared for us. And this threefold drinking out of the same cup is, as it were, a declaration, visible, tangible, of the fact that bride and bridegroom are taking into their hands a common destiny and will share it, all of it, every thing in it, but that this is neither water nor bitterness, this is the wine of the kingdom, the wine which Christ made out of water in Cana of Galilee. Yet this is the wine of the kingdom. We receive it in anticipation. It will be drunk only when all things are fulfilled, as Christ said at the Last Supper: 'I shall not drink of this cup again until we drink it new in the kingdom'.

And then the priest joins the hands of bride and bridegroom; he covers them with the stole which, if you remember what I said of the ordination of the priest and bishop, represents the grace of God poured upon the priest, so that this grace reaches the hands and the persons of bride and bridegroom, upholds them, makes them secure, makes them safe, makes them strong. And holding the crucifix in his hand, the priest takes them three times round the desk. On the desk there is only one thing left: the Book of the Gospel, Christ himself, Christ in his spoken word and Christ in his saving, invisible presence. And the meaning of this threefold procession is to call bride and bridegroom to understand that they are now going to tread their way in life. They will walk from that moment until their death through all the complexities of the earthly life and at the same time walk and move towards the fulfilment of their hope, their coming face to face with the Living God, who is Love fulfilled and fulfilling. This road can be trod only if at the centre of their life they set the Lord Jesus Christ, his Word, his Person, his presence, as the book is at the centre of their progression. And they follow, supported by the grace of God, they follow the priest who is holding the crucifix, saying to them: deny yourself. You were given love. Love. Think not of yourself but of the beloved One. Let him be all there is to it. Deny yourself and follow me, having taken up your cross.

But this way is not the way of the cross simply. It is a call to follow Christ indeed, but it is also a reminder that wherever Christ takes us, he has been there before us. He has trodden all the way. He has walked ahead of us. He is not taking us into what is to him the unknown. We can be secure. We can remember in this context Psalm 23: the Lord is my Shepherd.

And three things are sung during this procession: 'Rejoice, O Isaiah A Virgin has been with child and has borne a Son, Emmanuel, who is both God and man; Daybreak, the Dawn is his name; whom magnifying we call the Virgin blessed. 'O Holy Martyrs, who have fought the good fight and have received your crowns: Entreat ye the Lord that he will have mercy on our souls.' And the third time: 'Glory to thee, O Christ our God, the Apostles' boast, the Martyrs' joy, whose preaching was the consubstantial Trinity.'

And then the removal of the crowns. A short prayer: 'Be thou exalted, O Bridegroom, like unto Abraham; and be thou blessed, like unto Isaac; and do thou multiply like unto Jacob, walking in peace, and keeping the commandments of God in righteousness. And thou, O Bride, Be thou exalted like unto Sarah; exult thou, like unto Rebecca; rejoice in Thy children like unto Rachel: rejoice thou in Thy husband, fulfilling the conditions of the law: for so it is well-pleasing to God.' Then a last blessing and this is the end of the marriage service.

There are a number of things which should be said in addition to a description

of the service. We have prayed for perfect and peaceful love. A Russian writer of the turn of the century has said that the only true pattern of human relationships, of society or a family, is the Holy Trinity. So it is against the vision of what the Holy Trinity means in terms of love relationships that we can understand, as perfectly as it is given us, the meaning of this perfect love. There is also something to be said about steadfast faith. I have already indicated that it applies, as far as I can see, not only to our faith in God but to our faith in one another, to our faithfulness to the discovery and the knowledge of each other. And again there are the two passages from the Ephesians and from Cana of Galilee which require probably more elaboration than a cursory reading. So this is where we will begin in our next season, whenever that happens, and then we will also have to consider practical things. The practical things can be expressed in the words already quoted: 'The kingdom is taken by force' and that only those who are prepared to do violence to themselves can enter into it. There is also the problem of breakdown in marriage and of divorce and there is the problem of those who have not chosen to remain celibate and who are confronted by circumstances that are infinitely, varied, with an estate which is put upon their shoulders, but not of their choice.

So these are the various elements which I would like to touch upon in our next season before we move to the Eucharist, which will come aptly and naturally after what we will have discussed about marriage, because marriage is a particular case, a limited situation of oneness with God which expands in the Eucharist to the dimensions of the Church.

III MARRIAGE

As you remember from the description which I gave you of the rite of Holy Matrimony, it is made up of two parts, and these two parts originally, and indeed still now in a number of churches, are celebrated separately. There is a first one, which is the betrothal service, and the second one which is the marriage service, the crowning of the bride and bridegroom. In Orthodox countries in the past the Betrothal service was taken when an earnest, thought-out decision had been taken by both bride and bridegroom to marry. It was not a tentative decision and the betrothal was as binding in honour and in moral law as marriage itself was binding in civil law and in the sacramental sense. So the celebration of the betrothal had a very earnest, significant meaning.

It usually took place a year before the marriage service itself, and this explains why the question of whether the bride and the bridegroom are determined to marry one another comes at the beginning of the marriage service. This also explains the fact that nowadays, as a Betrothal service is very seldom celebrated before the marriage ceremony, why these questions are transferred to the beginning of the service. So from a descriptive point of view you may well remember that the bride and bridegroom come to the church. They come separately, the bridegroom coming first, and the bride arriving next. The Russian, indeed the Orthodox usage was that bride and bridegroom had not met on that day, having spent the day in spiritual preparation in praying and being ready to enter into sacramental union with one another. They were met by the singing of the Church greeting them and then, in the way in which we proceed now, the questions are

asked, and two of them succeed each other: 'Hast thou a good, firm and unconstrained will and a firm intention to take upon thyself as bride (or bridegroom) this man(or woman) whom thou seest here before thee?' And the second question: 'Thou hast not promised thyself to any other man (or woman)?'

And on receiving the appropriate answers, the priest blesses bride and bridegroom with a candle, either silently or, as it is done in several of the churches, parishes or local churches, by words such as 'Let your light so shine before men that, seeing your good deeds they give glory to your Father who is in heaven.' And then a blessing is pronounced: 'Blessed is our God.' 'Blessed is our God', because all that is being done and all that will result, is the gradual, progressive, and at times painstaking building of a cell of God's own kingdom: bride, bridegroom and God building together the beginning of the city of God in a world that has ceased to be God's dwelling place, God's kingdom in the full sense.

And then a litany. I want to take a few points in this litany, leaving the rest aside, prayers for bride and bridegroom, and then that the Lord will send down upon them perfect love, peace and his help. What I have just said about the building of the Kingdom is sufficient to understand what kind of help is necessary; it is something which is beyond human relationships. It is something which is greater than a pagan family, however happy. What they see called to do is to build God's kingdom in their midst, they, united by love to one another and by love to God.

At this point it may be useful to remark that when the Lord speaks of loving he does not use sentimental terms. When you read in the Gospels 'Whoever shall love me will fulfil my commandments', he is not speaking of any emotional condition. He is speaking of an earnest, determined faithfulness, a gratitude for what God is, a veneration for him that leads to living according to the standards which are God's standards and which are so alien to the world in which sin and evil have prevailed. Peace is also asked for bride and bridegroom - and again, not the kind of amnesty that exists between all of us until a quarrel flares up or until a difficulty arises, but that peace which only God can give and which nothing can take away, a peace which means that one is at peace with God, at peace with one's own conscience and consequently at peace with events and people. And then this perfect love.

The Russian philosopher Nikolai Fyodorov has said: 'The Holy Trinity is the social programme of Christendom.' The Holy Trinity is the only image of perfect love, and it is according to the image of the Trinity that this love must be built. It is a love in which everything is given, everything is received, and at the same time, at the heart of which the readiness to bring forth a perfect sacrifice of self is the root of the relationship. In the imagery of the New Testament we are told that the Son of God is at the same time the Lamb of God slain before all worlds. It seems to be very simple to give; it seems to be simple and easy to receive, but it is not always so. St Paul noted already that to give is easier than to receive; to receive with perfect joy, to receive with the exultation of humility requires a complete certainty of being loved. One does not receive with joy with open-heartedness, with gratitude untroubled, anything from someone in whose love one does not believe completely. A gift is acceptable only to the extent to which it expresses the love of the other person. On the other hand, giving is not as simple as we imagine. I remember a couple who asked me to come and solve the problem of their marriage and I discovered that the wife was being completely annihilated, reduced to nothing, by the

continuous giving of the husband. To begin with, he gave and she received with joy, because all that he gave expressed his love. Then she tried to give something to him and discovered that he did not want to receive anything; he wanted only to give. And she felt rejected. She felt that she could not respond by acts of love to the acts of love at the receiving end of which she was. And then gradually she felt more and more that there was nothing,, not only in what she could give but even in her, which she could contribute to her husband. She felt, as she put it to me, that she was nothing but an emptiness into which he was pouring his gifts. They were all an expression of love, and yet this love, this refusal to receive, refusal to be open and to be dependent at all on the love of the wife, was destructive of their relationship. She felt that she had no existence, no value any more. She was an emptiness. So it is important to realise that in a relationship the giving must be thoughtful, loving, but that there must also be at the same time an openness that will allow to receive, to receive with the same joy as one gives, to receive with the same joy as one should have when he gives. And then there was another side in their relationship which was destructive. He loved his wife with all his energy, all his mind and heart, all his feeling, and he felt that every relationship, every person, every interest, every object that she had known or possessed before they had met or which still existed in her life, something which was not exclusively an expression of their relationship, was destructive of this relationship, and he asked her to part with all the friends she had had and which they did not possess in common, because she had existed for them before she existed for him. He asked her to part with all the objects, all the books she had possessed before they met, because it testified to her existence and to a life in which he had had no part. And here again she felt destroyed because her whole past, ail that had made her what she was, was being denied, rejected, was to be completely annihilated, reduced to naught. It is a very important thing. It does not happen often, I nave never actually seen it happen with such ruthless brutality of a benighted love, but with lesser forms it does happen. There are people who always want to be at the giving end. They are people who always wish that life be reduced to their relationship and that nothing should exist either before they met or around their common life. And it is important for both not only to be able to give and to receive, but to accept in humility, more than humility, with wonder and with latitude, the existence or a whole world of experience, of relationships, of things and of persons, in the life of the beloved person, to accept them and love them, to integrate them through love into one's own life, to share them. But that requires also the ability of renouncing: renouncing to be the only one, renouncing to be the absolute and unique centre. It ultimately means acceptance of non-being, of non-existence in the past of the beloved person , or within certain relationships, of family love or of friendships, a sort of self-naughting, an acceptance to step out and not to exist at all so that the person loved should continue to possess his or her own life to the full without part of it being maimed or destroyed by the new life. And that is perhaps the most difficult thing people know in life. And this is one of the things which come under the heading of Christ's words that no one has greater love than one who is prepared to lay down his life for his neighbour, to give his life, to forego his life, in other words, to accent a momentary situation of death and of non-existence.

In the next petition we ask that the Lord will preserve them in oneness of mind and steadfast faith. And this oneness of mind is possible only if the previous conditions which we have enumerated prevail: perfect love, peace and divine help, because this oneness of

mind must include all that was, is and shall be. And also steadfastness of faith. When we read these words we think immediately of a vigorous faith in God, and that goes without saying, because God is the cornerstone of the city, and whether this city is the minute heel which we call the family or whether it is the ultimate city of God, he is the cornerstone. But there is also a necessity, a need for a steadfast faith in one another. Faith means certainty, certainty that things which seem, to be there, visible, tangible, perceptible and which have disappeared from sight are still there. It applies to love, it applies to all the ways in which a relationship lives, exists, wanes and resurrects. There are moments when certain aspects in a relationship simply have gone. It is a moment when we must have a certainty concerning the invisible, not doubt, be certain that it is there. This is expressed also in a further prayer, in which the Prodigal Son is mentioned. And to that we will come in a moment. Also we ask the Lord to bless them with a blameless life and honorable marriage, a marriage undefiled, faithfulness, purity of heart, purity of life, to bless them with children, to bless them with the fulfillment of all they may long for, wish for, ask for, but which are unto salvation, unto their good, and to deliver them from all that is evil or painful. And then come two prayers which are of great importance. In the one we say: 'O God eternal, who hast brought into unity those who were sundered, and hast ordained for them an indissoluble bond of love; who didst bless Isaac and Rebecca and didst make them heirs of thy promise: Bless also these thy servants.' 'Brought into unity those who were sundered'. We are born sundered from one another since the fall of mankind. The only power that can weld us into oneness is love, but not human love. Human love indeed, but also filled and fulfilled by love divine - a measure of love, a quality of love, a greatness and beauty of love which are beyond the power of man to achieve, a love which is reverence, a love which is faithfulness and purity. Those who were sundered are brought together by this miracle of human love and they turn to God from the first blessing in the hope that divine love will come upon them as a power and as a renewal. The image which comes to my mind is that which St Maxim the Confessor gives concerning the Incarnation, when he says: At the incarnation humanity was filled with divinity in the way in which a sword plunged into a glowing furnace becomes glowing itself so that one can cut with fire and burn with iron. This is also what we pray for that should happen in this union, is this pervasive presence of love divine in human love, so that every thing which is frailty, incompleteness should be destroyed, that all should be fulfilled and that all that is human should expand and reach the stature of things divine. And then Isaac and Rebecca are mentioned. It is not in vain and not by accident. In the Old Testament the story of Isaac and Rebecca shows us that Rebecca was the chosen bride of Isaac and that the one who chose was the Lord God, who revealed to the servant of Abraham whom he should betroth for his master Isaac. What we pray for is that both bride and bridegroom should have been chosen and ordained by God himself to be the two halves which God had decided to bring together and that they should be God's gift to each other, that it should not be only physical attraction, community of interest, tastes, human love and, least of all, worldly considerations, but that the love which one had for the other what no one else had ever seen in the other person, a vision of the other person in the light of the Transfiguration, a vision of the divine sinning; in the other person, a vision of a person in God. This is perhaps a reason why in older times when people were responsible for their actions, thoughtful in a way in which we are not in our days, there was such space left between

the Betrothal and the marriage, so that, having met one another, seen one another in the light of God, undertaken to grow into a relationship that would be an image of Trinitarian love, they should have time gradually to mature and to become fulfilled to the stature when is necessary for a mature and true marriage.

And then a second prayer: 'O Lord our God, who hast espoused the Church as a pure Virgin from among the Gentiles: Bless this Betrothal and unite and maintain these thy servants in peace and oneness of mind.' What strikes me in this passage is the reference of God espousing the Church as a pure virgin from among the Gentiles. When we think of the Old Testament we can see now far from being a pure virgin the chosen people were, and what made them into one whom God could espouse and bring, to the measure of fulfillment which love divine requires was love itself. It is love that makes one worthy. It is not worthiness that deserves love. But this love must be responded to. It is necessary to receive love with Humility, with reverence, as a sacrament in the strongest, the most realistic sense of the word, as something which is holy and belongs to the holiness of God. And only by receiving it in this way can one be restored to the newness, to the virginity of the first creation of God.

And then the Betrothal is fulfilled by the priest. The servant of God is betrothed to the handmaid of God in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' You may remember that the words 'in the Name' are not simply a liturgical formula. 'In the Name' means 'within', and the Name in the Old Testament and old Hebrew tradition was considered to be identical with the person. So, when we say 'in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost' it means that we are actually naming the three Persons of the Holy Trinity indeed and that by doing this we indicate that it is in Them and within their Persons, within their relationship, within what They are and can do, that this action is fulfilled.

Then a prayer comes in which more insistently than in the first prayer which I quoted we are told about the act of God which gave Rebecca to Isaac: 'O Lord our God, who didst accompany the servant of the patriarch, Abraham into Mesopotamia, when he was sent to espouse a wife for his lord Isaac; and who by means of drawing of water, didst reveal unto him that he should betroth Rebecca: Do thou, the same Lord, bless also the betrothal of these thy servants, a make firm the word which they have spoken. Establish and make stable their betrothal in faith, oneness of mind, in truth and in love.'

And then there is the putting on and the exchange of rings. 'By a ring was power given unto Joseph in Egypt; by a ring was Daniel glorified in the land of Babylon; by a ring was the uprightness of Tamar revealed; by a ring did our heavenly Father show forth his compassion upon his Son.' This giving of a ring is a moment when both express their mutual trust in one another, when they give all power upon themselves to the One in whom they have trusted perfectly, as perfectly as they humanly could. You remember that in older days, apart from the rings that were worn to beautify a hand, there was one ring which people wore that was their signet ring. It was a time when people were illiterate, and to put one's seal upon a document gave it absolute authority. To exchange rings meant to entrust to the other all power upon one's goods, one's life and one's honour. This exchange of rings gave power indeed, but a power that was greater than simply authority over objects, goods and possessions. It meant: 'I trust you to such an extent, with such perfection, that I put into your hands my honour and my life, my name and my all. And this is one of the remarkable things which we find in the story of the

Prodigal Son. The Prodigal Son had, humanly speaking, forfeited any right to be trusted by his father, and yet because he had come back, because he had recognized his sin, the father knew that he could trust him unreservedly and gave him power over everything - at a risk, because he could be betrayed - but with faith and certainty.

Here again we come to that passage which I have mentioned concerning steadfast faith. The father had faith in his son. All the material evidence that spoke against him was brushed aside by him because the son come back. And this is an example which is given us in this Betrothal Service which is addressed to the bride and bridegroom. There may be moments when appearances will cast a doubt upon the relationship. There will be moments when even material evidence will be against bride or bridegroom, husband or wife. It is the moment when an act of supreme faith would save everything as the Prodigal Son was saved by the faith of the father. Had the father received him coldly, asked him for an account of his stewardship of money, had claimed from him humiliation, an apology, the son might have gone away, but he was received. And when he said to his father: 'Make me as one of the hirelings in thy house', the father did not even allowed him to pronounce these words and commanded his servants to bring the ring and put it on his hand and to bring his first robe, not the best in the house, but the one which he had discarded, the robe of sonship, had let fall off his shoulders to put on the garish robes of a strange country. And so 'by thy own right hand, o Lord, didst thou arm Moses in the Red Sea; by the word of thy truth were the heavens established, and the foundations of the earth were made firm; and the right hands of thy servants shall be blessed also by thy mighty word, and by thine upraised arm.' This is the end of the Betrothal Service and these are the points which I wanted to attract your attention to, because they have got both a spiritual meaning and also practical, direct consequences in the way in which relationships can be handled.

In our next talk I will come to the order of marriage, that is to the Crowning and, as I told you, this is the point at which the questions 'Hast thou a good, free and unconstrained will and a firm intention to take unto thyself to wife this woman whom thou seest before thee?' and 'Thou hast not promised thyself to another bride?' - and of course vice versa - are asked when the two services are taken separately . But now we come to a point where it is no longer the choice of man, the good will of man alone which are decisive; it is a moment when all power comes from God, all action comes from God because this human relationship, this human love will be now integrated into the mystery of the Kingdom. The first words of the Crowning service are: 'Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. It is entering into the kingdom. It is widening the scale, and scope and vision and experience of human love to the immeasurable measurements of the divine love and divine relationships which will be the subject of this sacramental action in which God is the Celebrant, God is the one who, by his presence, as the litany will say: 'Bless this marriage as thou didst bless that in Cana of Galilee', will happen. This will be for the next talk, and I hope to be able to finish this part of the service, after which we will have a few more points to consider concerning marriage. The first one is the removal of the crowns, which is something that never happens nowadays and should at least be known and remembered, and also something about the order of second marriage, either after a bereavement or after a divorce And that will lead me to say a few words about the problem the marriage, dissolved or not.

Let us now keep quiet for a few moments and then we will pray and go in peace.

IV Holy Matrimony

In our meditations on the rite of matrimony we have reached that part which is called the crowning. The first words of this service are words which are proclaimed in a few services at the moment when God takes over in a complete and sovereign manner, in which his power is to be manifest, and only he can fulfil what was meant to be. The first words of this service are: Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. They indicate that we have come to a moment in the service which will be at the same time a revelation of the beauty of what the Kingdom is, and indeed at the same time and equally, a challenge offered to those who are a part of it. Either in a shaking manner or inconspicuously the Kingdom comes into the life of people. It came to the life of the Twelve at the moment when the risen Christ appeared to them and gave them his peace, that peace which the world cannot give. It came in an overwhelming manner when St Paul met the Risen Christ face to face and recognised in the man who had been murdered on Calvary his Lord and his God. And in that sense the service of the Crowning is a moment when in the quietness of prayer, in the retiring and inconspicuous way in which the Spirit of God acts, the Kingdom is there, offered, there to be taken.

The reading of the Gospel which will come later in the service makes us understand the conditions under which a human gathering can become the Kingdom. You remember that the reading is taken from the second chapter of St. John's Gospel, the first twelve verses, and that it is the story of Cana in Galilee, where the Lord was invited and to which the Mother of God and his disciples came also. I have mentioned more than once the conversation that runs between the Mother of God and her divine Son, and I will be brief on that. You remember that when they wanted wine, the Mother of God turned to Jesus and said: They have no wine. And then Jesus asked her a question, a question that was decisive at that moment. He wanted to know whether his power could be made manifest or not, because it is only within the context of the Kingdom that it can be made manifest. Jesus said: 'Woman, what I have to do with thee? Mine hour has not yet come. What is it that prompts you to attract my attention to their need? Is it because you are my mother according to the flesh? Then we are still in the secular world.' Or – he does not indicate any 'or'. He points out with sharpness in these words 'Mine hour is not yet come' the alternative which must be rejected, which must not be there.

And then the Mother of God with her perfect faith in her Son, knowing Who He is, says to the servants: 'Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it.' And because she has believed - and you remember the words of Elizabeth to her when she came to visit Elizabeth: 'Blessed is she who has believed; it will be done to her according to the word of God'. With her perfect faith she alone opens the Kingdom of God and makes a miracle possible. And so in that sense the Kingdom of God is there, and yet it is possible because it is a congregation of people who believe, who believe in Christ as their Lord and their God. We will hear in the litany that we ask him to bless this marriage as he blessed that in Cana of Galilee. He is present. But there is also a challenge in this proclamation of the Kingdom, because the Kingdom of God - to use the translation of the Jerusalem Bible in Luke 16:16 - the Kingdom of God is to be taken by storm. One cannot wait for it as one waits for the tide to come and lift a stick. One must take it by storm. Offered and given, it can be possessed only by continuous effort. One does not enter into the Kingdom through

a wide gate, but through a narrow gate. And at that moment bride and bridegroom are told by a simple explanation that all is there, all is offered, and yet that they will have to achieve by concerted and united effort, that purity, that oneness, indeed that holiness which the Kingdom expects and requires. So there are the two extremes which are expressed here in only one phrase. And it is important that bride and bridegroom should remember that the sacramental action will not put them into possession of all they long for. The sacramental action will put close to their hands, ready to be taken, all and much more than they can imagine or dream or hope for. But the Kingdom is to be taken by storm. One must storm one's own self, storm everything which is alien to the Kingdom, conquer and destroy it in the same way in which the walls of Jericho had to fall because the song of God's victory was sung around them.

After this exclamation, the great litany, the litany of peace, with special petitions: 'For the servants of God so and so, who are now being united to each other in the community, in the common life of marriage, and for their salvation. That the Lord will bless this marriage as he blessed that in Cana of Galilee. That he will grant them chastity, and children. That he will rejoice them in sons and daughters. That their children be virtuous offspring. That all the petitions which they make for salvation will be granted unto them.'

The word 'chastity' perhaps requires a word of explanation. Both in Greek and Slavonic the word chastity has a meaning a great deal wider than that which it has acquired in modern Western languages and indeed in modern Russian. It means a wholeness, a wholeness of wisdom, a wholeness that proceeds from sharing in the wisdom and the vision of God. It does not attach to bodily relationships only. It begins at the moment when our eyes are opened to see things and people as God sees them, to see every person as independent from us, as having, before the eyes of God an absolute value and meaning, to see in each person someone who is not simply a reflection of our life or the shadow which is cast by our life, but the person who stands before God in all the mystery of this face to face relationship. And it is only when we can look at a person in this way that reverence, a worshipful attitude can bind two persons and make all relationship in mind, in heart and action, in body and soul, into a liturgical and holy relationship.

And then can come a number of prayers in which names are remembered, again those of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebecca, of Jacob and Rachel and others, but also of Zacharias and Elizabeth, the parents of St John the Forerunner, and of the Mother of God, Ever-Virgin Mary. And we pray that as Christ was present in Cana with his invisible protection, he should be here also, giving to the bride and bridegroom peace, life, length of days, integrity, chastity, mutual love in the bond of peace, long-lived seed, gratitude from their posterity, and a crown of glory which fadeth not away – that which is offered and which is to be conquered. And at the moment of the crowning, a little later, it is brought forth very clearly that these crowns are put upon the heads of bride and bridegroom indeed, but it is through a life worthy of the Kingdom which is offered that they will be in the end possessed of this eternal glory and crowned by God. Preserve them unassailed; give them of the dew of heaven from on high and the fatness of the earth. Fill their houses with wheat and wine and oil and with every abundance, that they may bestow in turn upon the needy.

Then a second prayer, in which we ask for God's blessing upon them and for

God to remember them, as he remembered the saints of old and the heroes of the spirit throughout the ages.

And then the crowning. I must have mentioned already that this act of the crowning goes back, far back in the thought of Byzantium and ancient Rome. The ancient city was an association of families. Every family had a right to belong to it or to secede, and an absolute right to express itself in the council of the city. In ancient Greece, in Athens, it was an ecclesia, the assembly of lawful citizens, of actions that had all power over its destiny. And as long as a young man or a young woman were not married they were part and parcel of the family in which they had been born. But when they were married they were established as an independent unit. They were, as it were established as a sovereign state. And bride and bridegroom became at that moment king and queen, prince and princess. In old Russia on the day of their wedding they were indeed called by these names. They now had sovereignty and independence. This crowning made them independent to such an extent that in Byzantium if two slaves were married to one another the crowning was left aside by the power of the state because to be crowned meant to become free, no longer slaves but free men and women. So this had a very important social, political significance. But there are also other meanings attached to these crowns. On the one hand, in the ancient world the crown was worn by people at great festivities. And which festivity could be greater for bride and bridegroom than their own wedding? And again - and this I have already mentioned - these crowns remind us that crowns are ready for the believers, are ready for those who will have fought the good fight and who will have conquered, the Kingdom of God taken by storm. Those people who have stormed will be crowned. And this is made very clear also by the troparia which are sung during the procession which follows later after the Gospel, in which in the second of the troparia we sing: 'O holy martyrs, who fought the good fight and have received your crowns, entreat ye the Lord that he will have mercy on our souls.' And you may remember that the word *martyr* - which has acquired now a very specialised meaning, to speak of people who have shed their blood in the name of their faith, for God - in Greek means 'witness': people who through all their life, and indeed if necessary through their death, have witnessed their faithfulness to God, to the Gospel, to one another, who have fought that good fight through which the Kingdom was stormed and who now will also receive their crowns. 'The servant of God is crowned unto the handmaid of God in the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' Crowned for one another, crowned to be for one another king and queen, crowned because the love of the two, fulfilled by the power of the Spirit of God, is the crowning of life, and that is done in the Name of God One in the Holy Trinity. Crowned that they may be one as only within the Kingdom of God people can be one.

'O Lord our God, crown them with glory and honour. Thou hast set upon their heads crowns of precious stones. They asked life of Thee, and Thou gavest it them. For Thou wilt give them thy blessing for ever and ever; thou wilt make them to rejoice with gladness through thy presence.'

And then comes a very complex reading, the reading of the Epistle. It is complex because the Apostle moves continuously between his thought about the Church in relation to Christ, Christ in relation to the Church, and the relationship between husband and wife. Basically what it says is that the relationship that exists between Christ and the Church is that which should exist between husband and wife, a love that knows

of no separation, a love that is such that both are prepared to leave everything and also to follow, accompany or serve the other. In the case of Christ it is the Lamb of God slain before all ages that becomes the Son of God incarnate, leaving, as it were, the glory of the divine throne in order to take on the condition of a slave. And in the Old Testament we read that the bridegroom should leave father and mother to cling to his wife. But at the same time the bride is one who for the sake of love has proved able, or is prepared, through a struggle that may last throughout their life, to let go of everything, one thing after the other or all things in one, in order to follow him whom she has loved with undivided love.

And we have an example, very curious and interesting, in the lives of two saints who are remembered on the 18th of November. Galactionus and Epistemia, both Christian, both very young: they were married and they both wanted to give all their life to God unreservedly. And on the first evening when they were together they shared their thoughts and they decided that, married as they were, without rejecting this bond of love which had been crowned in marriage, they would both go into separate monasteries to lead a life of asceticism and of prayer. But a few years later a persecution was started and Epistemia went to her abbess and said: 'I have heard that my husband has been taken and will die a martyr; my place is by him.' And the abbess recognised this claim, and Epistemia went, and she died with her husband.

This is a very remarkable story because it shows the awareness which the Church has of this unique relationship and this unbreakable bond between husband and wife. You remember this passage in the Book of Revelation: 'Only one thing I have against thee, that thou hast forgotten thy first love.' And this is the standard which is offered in marriage to every husband and every wife. And it is the reason why I insisted so heavily on the fact that the Kingdom of God which opens wide before them as a possibility, indeed more than a possibility, as the divine presence in their midst, must be conquered and cannot simply be enjoyed.

And then there is a passage which indicates to the husband his responsibility, that the husband should love his wife as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for her. And to make it concrete, real - because imagery is not always convincing - St Paul takes another image: men ought so to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. No man ever yet hated his own flesh. We are members of his body, of his flesh, of his bones. And in this passage he makes us perceive concretely the closeness of the relationship. We very often speak lightly of our bodies. We imagine at times that we are spiritual beings encased temporarily in a body, that what matters are our lofty thoughts, our feelings, our decisions, and that our bodies are just instruments that may later be discarded. But when illness and pain, when danger is directed towards our bodies, then we do realise that our bodies are our own selves, that we cannot say 'My body is sick unto death but I am not'.

And this is the image which St Paul has chosen to indicate how close one wife and husband are. 'For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh', that is one person. Then he moves on again to the Church: 'This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the Church.' And this is why - in this context in which Christ and the Church, husband and wife, their relationships, are so interwoven - one of the spiritual writers has said that the relationship between husband and wife is the image of the relationship between God and

man and is also an image of the way in which sacramentally a person is united to Christ in communion and baptism.

So the husband is called to love his wife as Christ loved his Church, that is, give himself for her, in life, in death, in the storming of the Kingdom. 'And the wife is called to see that she reverence her husband' in the way in which the Church turns to Christ. But this again is a challenge, perhaps a promise, but certainly not an immediate reality. Reverence is something that must be not only claimed but earned. It is only by giving oneself that one can earn this reverence, born of the sense of the total gift of the other and of the readiness to sacrifice all things for the sake of the beloved.

And here I come to the second part of the reading of the Gospel. The Kingdom of God is established because one person, one woman, Mary, Mother of Jesus, has had and manifested a total and unreserved faith. And this is perhaps one of the callings of the wife in the relationship there is in the family, to be the one who believes, who in the family is in the image, an icon of the Mother of God, the one whose faith can make a secular situation into a sacramental one, one whose faith can recreate the Kingdom when it is darkened or create that relationship which we call the Kingdom. But it is not a faith which should be possessed simply secretly in one's heart. The Mother says to servants: 'Whatever he saith, do it.' It is a faith that must be shared, given. This faith must be a call to believe, a call to heroic belief, to heroic faithfulness to the Kingdom.

And the next thing, the miracle itself. It was commented in this particular context in approximately the following way. Here are six waterpots of stone, and because the Kingdom has come, because the servants have been drawn through obedience into the faith of the Mother of God, this water becomes the wine of the Kingdom. It has been said more than once that when we enter into a relationship of mutual love, we give everything we can to one another: material, intellectual, our heart and mind, everything. But there comes a moment when, humanly speaking, there is nothing new to give. All that was sparkling gift gradually becomes, day by day, water. And this is the moment when we must remember that it is only God that can transform this water into the wine of the Kingdom. The governor of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him: 'Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine. Thou hast kept the good wine until now.'

A litany follows the Gospel, as it always does, to express the fact that we have received the message. And it is fulfilled in the Lord's Prayer. This prayer has the same characteristics as what I said earlier about the Kingdom. On the one hand, it is the Kingdom already come. On the other hand, it is a challenge. At the beginning are the words of a true son: Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' No concern for anything except the Name of God, his Kingdom, his will. And then comes the real, concrete situation of people, us all, who are called to this perfect sonship in which we share with Christ. He is the Head of the Body. The beginning of these prayers are his words, but we are not where he is. We are in the making. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.' That is our cry, our need. And this prayer is also a programme, a map, a road, because we can ascend to the condition of the Only-begotten Son in whom we become sons and daughters of our heavenly Father, only if, to begin with, from the deep, from the suffering, from the darkness, lost as we are, we can still say: 'Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory.' And it is at the moment when

we can proclaim in the very darkness of our imprisonment in sin and misery that we recognise the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as our King and that to Him we owe total and unique allegiance, that we can go on and say: 'Deliver us from the evil one, save us from temptations.' Forgive as we want or do forgive; give us that daily bread which is already the bread of eternal life.

In earlier days the marriage service was combined with the Liturgy, the Communion service, and at this point after the Lord's prayer, as it happens in the Eucharistic Liturgy, husband and wife receive Communion from the same bread and the same cup. Then the two services become independent from one another, expressing two different, yet similar realities. One sign was left, the common cup, which bride and bridegroom share at this moment. You know the imagery of the Cup, meaning in poetic language or in ancient lore: destiny. Did not Christ say: "Are you prepared to drink the cup which I am to drink?" And so they are offered a cup of wine, of which each of them drinks three times. And having accepted their oneness in this ultimate act of community, they will be taken in a procession round the central desk, on which there was in the beginning, as I told you, the book of the Gospel, that is Christ, his Word, his presence, and a crucifix. But now the crucifix is taken by the priest. He joins the hands of bride and bridegroom. He holds them under the stole which is an image of the oil of consecration which was poured on the priest in the Old Testament, representing the divine grace which comes down from heaven upon them, and he takes them three times around this desk, a circling journey with the Word and the presence of Christ at its very centre. He takes them round under the grace, and he takes them round with this crucifix, indicating thereby that Christ has trod all the way before them, that they need not be afraid that Christ is not calling them to walk where he has not walked himself. He has gone all the way before them, they can save him, follow him, follow his command, be faithful to the end.

And on the other hand, that everyone who wishes to follow Christ must take up his cross, deny himself and follow. This is the way in which the Kingdom is stormed. But the first thing we rejoice in is the Incarnation: 'Rejoice, O Isaiah! A Virgin has been with child, and has borne a Son, Emmanuel, both God and man, the Dawn of the Day is his name, and magnifying him, we call the Virgin blessed.' And then 'O Holy Martyrs, who fought the good fight and have received your crowns: Entreat ye the Lord that he will have mercy on our souls.' And again: 'Glory to thee, O Christ, our God, Martyrs' joy, whose preaching was the consubstantial Trinity.

And after this procession the crowns are removed from bridegroom and bride, a last blessing is given, and the crowning service is over.

V

MARRIAGE, concluded

In my previous talks I have tried to show what the Orthodox Church means to convey to the bride and the bridegroom through the service in the context of a sacramental action within a deed of God about marriage. The marriage, which is called to be the beginning of the Kingdom of God when two are no longer two but one - but only a beginning, because, as I mentioned it last time, the Kingdom of God must be taken by

storm, and only those who are prepared to storm it can enter it. Storming means conquest. It means conquering one's old self so that nothing of it is left which is alien to God's purpose, which is not capable of integration into God's eternal Kingdom, of becoming one of the building stones of the New Jerusalem. This is a call to struggle throughout a whole life, with inspiration, with joy, with stern determination, against everything which is self-centredness or which is the natural, aggressive greed of fallen mankind.

I have mentioned that at the root of the prayers which we offer we ask for mutual chastity, for integrity, for love - and all this in a relationship of true freedom and true humility, a humility which consists not in denigrating one's own self but in being open --humbly, reverently, worshipfully -- to the other, ready to receive what will be given, never to grudge what is not offered, never to complain of what the other is not yet capable of giving.

The marriage service, as we know it now, came into being very late in history. To begin with, in the ancient Christian world the civil marriage, the declaration before the assembly of the citizens of the place that two have decided to be one family, to belong together for life and for ever, was considered as sufficient, and it was crowned not in the liturgical manner in which the crowning is done now, but in the spiritual manner by bride and bridegroom receiving communion together at the nearest liturgy. What is left of this, as I have already mentioned, is the drinking of the common cup, a symbol that represents the sacramental communion which is no longer given, since mixed marriages are allowed, which exclude the sacramental participation of one of the spouses in the eucharistic feast.

You remember that in the Epistle which is read, Ephesians 6, the relationship between husband and wife is likened unto that of Christ and the Church, this being the root, and also the completion, of several of the prayers that precede, particularly of the two short prayers which I read in the beginning of the Betrothal Service. This relationship is what defines, what conditions the elements which I marked, singled out a moment ago: chastity, integrity, humility, freedom, love. Again, I have already mentioned to you that chastity cannot be reduced, as it is done in modern languages, to the physical relationship of people, or to the rejection of a greedy approach to the physical being of another person. Chastity begins much deeper within the soul and the love of the person. It begins at the moment when it is understood that each person was created by God to be part of the Kingdom, created by God in his own image, in order to be holy, to be God's own splendence, God's splendour both in body and soul. It begins at that moment when we can look at another person and experience what one of the Desert Fathers said when he declared: 'He who has seen his neighbour has seen his God' - a holy icon to be treated with all the veneration, all the reverence and love, in both joy and sadness, which we would offer to an icon. It is an attitude that makes us remember that no one, not even those whom we imagine we love, exists only in function of our own self, that everyone has got his own uniqueness, is unrepeatable, and is related to God by an experience of God, a knowledge of God, and within a love relationship which is unrepeatable, out of comparison - and that our vocation, the vocation of each of us, is to protect this relationship and this virtual prospective perfection and beauty - that we are called to be servants of this beauty and holiness in each other. And this is on the limit, from the verbal point of view and from the point of view of the spiritual experience of the saints, with the meaning of virginity.

Again, we define virginity in a clinical manner, but this is not what it is primarily. Otherwise one of the authors of the *Philokalia*, Nicetas Stethatos, a disciple of St Symeon the New Theologian, could not have said: 'Tears of true repentance can give us back even our physical virginity when we have lost it.' Virginity is wholeness. It is supreme integrity of a person in whom spirit, soul and body, hierarchically united, are directed towards the Living God, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. And this explains why the imagery of Christ and the Church in the marriage service led the early Church, and for centuries running, to allow marriage, as it stands in our present form, only to those who came as virgins to the sacrament -- the virginity of Christ and the virginity of his creation redeemed, renewed in tears of repentance or remained pure and offered as a perfect offering to the Living God.

This explains why, after the service which I described in the last talks, we have this prayer at the removal of the crowns on the eighth day. It is a short prayer that reads: 'O Lord our God, who hast blessed the crown of the year, and permittest these crowns to be laid upon those who are united to one another by the law of marriage, and thus grantest unto them, as it were a reward of chastity; for they are pure who are united in the marriage which thou hast made lawful: Do thou bless also in the removal of these crowns those who have been united to one another, and preserve their union indissoluble; that they may evermore give thanks unto thine all-holy Name.'

These crowns were removed on the eighth day because for all these days bride and bridegroom had no physical relationship with each other but spent their time in spiritual exercise. This is something that has fallen out of practice but which remains for us as a reminder of the ideal, of a sacrament once received and kept through prayer and meditation that excludes every wanton attitude to one another and allows love, unselfish, worshipful, reverent, to grow to full maturity.

I have mentioned earlier that, apart from chastity, that ultimate integrity of the virginal life, there are also humility, freedom and love. Those who are familiar with my talks will remember that humility is not a simple recognition of one's unworthiness. It is not born of a continuous consideration of one's faults, of one's sins. That would lead more often to despair and despondency. Humility is born in two different ways: on the one hand, by the experience of the closeness of God, of a sense of God that makes us see him as the Holy One, in a beauty unsurpassed, a holiness and greatness beyond compare and leads us to bow down before him in adoration. You remember that I mentioned to you several years back that the English word God comes from a Germanic root which means 'Him before whom one falls and prostrates oneself in adoration'.

It is the vision of the divine beauty and the perception of the divine holiness that awakens in a creature the wonderful sense of humility, the sense which the very word - and this is my second point - conveys, humility being born of the Latin word 'humus' which means the fertile ground, the fertile ground which, silent, unresisting, is there under the sky, receiving the dew of night, the warmth of day, the rain and the snow, receiving with equal silence and acceptance the refuse which man pours upon it and from all of it becoming ever richer, abandoned, given, perfectly offered. And in that sense humility and virginity are very close together, and we could see this closeness in the *Magnificat*.

And then freedom. We all imagine that we love one another, without realising how much loving in our vocabulary and experience means desire to possess, desire to

master. I remind you that in *Screwtape Letters* C. S. Lewis gives us an image of what he calls the devil's love when he says, in the words of the old demon: 'I cannot understand what Christ means by saying that he loves you, that he loves his creatures, because when I love, I want to possess, I want to devour, to digest so that nothing is left of him whom I love, outside and apart from me. To a greater or smaller extent there is something of this in all the ways in which we love one another, until we hear the words of Christ: 'Renounce thyself, turn away from thyself, look with new eyes at all the world and at every person, and set this person, this world, free of that slavery which you call love.' Love is perfect freedom, yes, perfect love, true love, because the word 'freedom' does not mean liberty, does not mean independence; it means etymologically a love relationship.

So here again we find in this prayer of the removal of the crowns the fulfilment of this long line of spiritual teaching which the service of matrimony - the betrothal and the crowning - have revealed.

Then there is the order of the second marriage. How can one conceive of this second marriage against the background of words like those of the Book of Revelation: 'Only one thing I have against thee, that thou hast forgotten thy first love.' Indeed the ideal would be one unique marriage - one marriage so deep, so perfect, into the oneness in which the oneness between bride and bridegroom should reach that measure which, in a comparison of one of the Greek Fathers, can be likened only to the union of the faithful with Christ in Communion. Yes, this is the ideal. And yet we live in a world in which all of us are wounded and are incapable of achieving it. But the ideal remains. This ideal is fulfilled by some, and at times by many. This unicity of marriage, this completeness of love is to be found. But as St Paul puts it in one of his epistles, 'Better it is to marry again than to burn.' And to burn does not mean simply to feel physically incapable of a chaste life of continence. It means being aflame in mind and in heart with something which is not divine fire, the fire of God.

And so the Church has accepted a second marriage in a variety of situations. There is a Russian saying - harsh, neat as every popular proverb - that shows the perception which people had of marriage and of its multiplicity when it occurs. The proverb runs like this: The first marriage is of God. The second marriage is of men. A third marriage is of the demon. It indicates a gradual degradation of the sense of one's own wholeness and of the wholeness there can be within a relationship. But the order of second marriage is applied differently in different circumstances. In principle, it is applied as it stands in the books - and I will come to this in a moment - always, but when one of the two, the bride or the bridegroom, one of the two spouses, enters into this marriage without having contracted another marriage before, the Church, speaking no longer of the Church but the concrete brotherhood and sisterhood of men and women, can show compassion and, instead of casting a shadow on the joy of the bride and bridegroom, will allow them a marriage as though it was a first marriage because it is the first for one of the two persons.

If two persons contract a second marriage, then prayers are read which underline the fact that it is an act of condescension, an act of love, of loving concern on the part of the Church acting for God, but a sad act. Here is the prayer, and the translation is, as usual, poor, but I have no better: one: 'O Master, Lord our God, who showest mercy upon all men, whose providence is over all thy works, Thou knowest the secrets of man, and thou understandest us all. Purge away our sins. Forgive the transgressions of thy

servants, calling them to repentance, granting them remission of all sins, purification of all sins, pardon of their errors, whether voluntary or involuntary. O thou who knowest the frailty of man's nature, in that thou art his Maker and Creator; who didst pardon Rahab the harlot and accept the contrition of the Publican, remember not the sins of our ignorance from our youth up. If thou wilt consider iniquity, O Lord, O Lord, who shall stand before thee? Or what flesh shall be justified in thy sight? Thou only art righteous, sinless, holy, plenteous in mercy, of great compassion, and sorrowest over the evils of men. Do thou, O Master, who hast brought together in wedlock these thy servants, unite them to one another in love: vouchsafe unto them the contrition of the Publican, the tears of the Harlot, the confession of the Thief; that, repenting with their whole heart, they may do thy commandments in peace and oneness of mind and may be deemed worthy also of thy heavenly kingdom.' And later: 'O Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, who wast lifted up on the precious and life-giving cross, and didst thereby destroy the handwriting against us, and deliver us from the dominion of the Devil: Cleanse thou the sins of thy servants; because they, being unable to bear the heat and burden of the day are now entering into the bond of a second marriage, as thou didst render lawful by thy chosen vessel, Paul thine Apostle, saying, for the sake of us humble sinners, it is better to marry in the Lord than to burn. Wherefore, inasmuch as thou art good and lovest mankind, do thou show mercy and forgive, cleanse, put away, pardon our transgressions. For thou art he who didst take our infirmities on thy shoulders; for there is none sinless, or without uncleanness for so much as a single day of his life, save only thou, who without sin didst endure the flesh, and bestowest on us passionlessness eternal.'

There is a third situation in which the second marriage takes place. It is as a result of a previous divorce. Now, in the context again of what was said before, in the context also of the Gospel itself, a divorce is a breaking of hope, of the hope of building together the kingdom of God. Two persons who divorce renounce to take the kingdom by storm. They accept defeat. But is it true that they only accept defeat, or that they alone are defeated? And this is a very important point in the attitude of the Orthodox Church towards divorce. In the two prayers which I read a moment ago you may have noticed that the priest and therefore through him, in his person, the whole congregation does not say 'Forgive them' but 'Forgive us', because if it is true that we are all members, true limbs of one living body, then the sins and shortcomings and the failures of the one weigh heavily on the shoulders of all. If from the height of the Liturgy and of theology we come into the valley, to descend from the Mount of Transfiguration into the valley where Christ met human suffering and lack of faith and uncertainty:

'I believe, Lord; forgive my unbelief', then we must realise that most marriages between people are performed under conditions that should not exist. Few are those who wish to go through the rite of matrimony in order to become dramatically, if necessary, tragically if necessary, a dynamic icon of the kingdom. Few enter into marriage paying attention to the call to martyrdom, to be witnesses even unto blood and death, unto the rending of one's soul, unto the acceptance of ultimate pain. And this is not the fault of those who enter into marriage with a sinful love which they have learned from their humanity. It is the result of what our Christian society has become and is. No one is being prepared, no one sees images and examples, and moreover there is not in the law of the Church anything that could allow the priest to refuse nowadays to marry two Orthodox persons or an Orthodox person and a Christian believer of another denomination. And so

the Church remembers the words of Christ in which He said that there should be no divorce, but that Moses allowed divorce to the people of Israel because of their hardness of heart. Too often in the churches which do not accept divorce it seems to be assumed that hardness of heart died together with the Old Testament, that there is no such thing among Christians. And alas, there is only too much of it. And in an act of compassion, in an act of total solidarity, of responsible solidarity with the fate of this bride and bridegroom who, unprepared, unenlightened, we have allowed to enter into the dread path of a Christian marriage, the Orthodox Church allows divorce.

It is a fact which we cannot pass by, that apart from divorces of convenience, divorces that take place because it is an easy way out of a tense and difficult psychological relationship, there is such a thing as the death of a human love. I said a human love. A love that would be mature and fulfilled in God would survive, but a human love based on physical attraction, community of taste, joy of togetherness, may not survive the hardships of life.

And here we recognise death as we recognise it in the physical world. But this does not mean that every person who is divorced has a right to be married in church again. First of all, the rule is that a lengthy penance is laid upon both sides – what we would call the guilty and the not guilty side – a lighter penance on the one whose responsibility is greater. And it is not simply an interdiction to marry. A person who is divorced should be put in the charge of a priest to be spiritually retrained, to be taught to be a Christian and eventually, perhaps, to be allowed to marry later. So the present day attitude that any divorced person without further investigation can claim a right to a second marriage is very alien to the mind of the Church. The ideal remains: the vision of a marriage in the image of Christ and the Church, the ideal of building the kingdom of God at the cost of one's life. The Fathers used to say: Shed thy blood; thou shalt receive the Spirit: the call to storm the kingdom, to conquer one's whole self unreservedly to the power of God in order to become one of the stones of which the New Jerusalem will be built.

...They remain the same. But compassion is what we find in Christ, in the Gospel, and the compassion which is directed towards the beauty of a new life through love but also through an earnest call not to fail, to follow God's own call, to be one as he and the Father are one, and to achieve a unity which is as deep, as pure and as perfect as that which is achieved in sacramental communion of the body and blood of Christ, between Christ and his creature.