

FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL

© Perspective Magazine 1997

These resources can be re-cycled, but not reproduced in print without prior permission from The Editor.

E-mail: editor@perspective.org.au

As the Minister of a University congregation in Canberra, DAVID McDONALD has plenty of opportunities to preach at weddings! Here are the outlines of four gospel-based sermons that have proven particularly effective...

WEDDING 1

"Forgiveness"

Matthew 18:21-35

Introduction

We've just read from Matthew 18. And you know, verses 21 and 22 might well have said this: "Then Jeff came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive Justine when she sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'"

Justine and Jeff, when it comes to forgiveness, are you keeping count? Maybe you're past your quota already? How often should you forgive each other? Forgiveness is a very important topic when it comes to marriage. There is probably no other relationship where it's more needed.

Marriage is getting a lot of bad press at the moment. It doesn't exactly have a shiny record - in fact we hear about separations and divorces every day. For those of you who are married - how many of you would say your marriage is ideal, or even working well? When you get two people, well practised at putting themselves first, and join them together in marriage, it can make for a serious explosion. That's why forgiveness is so important.

When Jesus said we should forgive 77 times, it's his way of saying keep on. Keep forgiving. And don't stop.

[RECAST THE STORY IN MODERN TERMS - perhaps a boss who forgives a worker.]

It's an amazing story, isn't it. It leaves you horrified that anyone can be so mean and uncaring. In the end the bloke gets what he deserves. But there is a barb in the story. What we need to realise is that this story is really talking about us - about the way you and I behave.

Let's identify the characters in the story. Jesus is telling a parable about the kingdom of heaven. The king in this story is God. The servant in the story with the massive debt is you. Each of us here. It's you - Jeff, Justine, (start to mention other people in the congregation by name). This is the character you're meant to identify with. The other

character can be anybody you know. Someone who may have done something against you, hurt you in some way.

I want to make two points from the story: first, about God's forgiveness, and then secondly, about our forgiveness of others.

1. God's forgiveness

In the story, the king forgives the servant a debt of millions of dollars. In reality God is willing to forgive us far more than that.

Let's look at the magnitude of God's forgiveness. Everything we've ever done wrong - complete, total forgiveness. All the things we've done to hurt others; all our dishonesty, shame, selfishness, rejection of God; imagine if it was all written in a book. God promises to tear out every page and destroy it. He offers complete and total forgiveness.

I heard some one say recently: "Christianity is a religion of guilt." Nothing could be further from the truth. Christianity is about guilt being removed - genuine, complete forgiveness.

And let's look at the cost of God's forgiveness. In the story the forgiveness offered by the king comes at great personal cost (millions of dollars). In reality the forgiveness God offers comes at an even greater price. The cost to God is the death of his Son, Jesus. Jesus, who bore all our guilt upon himself as he died upon the cross.

We're about to celebrate Easter. It's there that we see the love and mercy of God in action. It's there that we see the forgiveness of God offered to those who ignore him. It's there that we see the enormous price God was prepared to pay for us. If you want to appreciate the enormity of God's forgiveness, then look more closely at the death of Jesus. It's there that you will see just how much God loves us.

If you have experienced and appreciate the magnitude and the cost of God's forgiveness, then you've got a reason and a motivation to treat others in the same way.

2. Our forgiveness of others

The man in the story failed to grasp the size of God's forgiveness. It didn't affect the way he treated others. But this story is for us.

Let me ask you - Jeff and Justine - will the fact that God has forgiven you all that you've ever done wrong, at great personal expense, be a reason and a motivation to treat others differently? Are you going to be willing to forgive others? Will you forgive each other?

Where there is no forgiveness, there is no relationship. Forgiveness lies at the very heart of relationship - with God, and with each other.

Jeff and Justine, if you want to destroy your relationship, there are two easy ways to do it...

1. forget how much God has forgiven you
2. refuse to forgive each other.

I know that's not what you want. So, Justine, when Jeff hurts you - and he will - remember how much God has forgiven you and offer Jeff your forgiveness. And, Jeff,

when Justine hurts you - and she will - remember how much God has forgiven you and offer Justine your forgiveness.

And both of you, please remember 'forgiveness' is more than just words. It's an attitude that comes from the heart. It will be shown in the way you treat each other - by your actions.

There may well be big things that you will need to forgive each other. But it will start with the very little, almost inconsequential things. And it's desperately important that you forgive each other those things.

Forgiveness will stop the little things becoming big things. There will be all sorts of situations. Justine leaving stuff lying around the house when Jeff is trying to keep it tidy. Justine organising friends for dinner and Jeff getting home late having forgotten.

One of you sick or tired and just taking it out on the other. One of you spending money on things without talking it through with the other. You'll fail to consider each other's needs. You'll hurt each other's feelings. You'll see yourself as the innocent one and demand that your partner be the one to apologise.

In any of these situations, and the 1001 others that will come up, how are you going to deal with them? "I'm not going to be the one to apologise." Stand your ground? Freeze up and not communicate? Start throwing bricks and abuse at each other? Ignore it and pretend everything's okay? Walk out?

These are the normal solutions. Some others here may have other suggestions. But these are the normal ways people cope. And that's why our marriages are so bad and divorce is so high. We need to break the mould. We need to rewrite the script. As Christians, we need to be abnormal.

Jeff and Justine, if you want a relationship that brings joy and that will last ... and each of us, if we want to enjoy sincere relationships with others ... then we need to remember two things. Number 1, how much we have been forgiven by God. And number 2, because we've been forgiven so much, let's have the same commitment to forgiving others - whatever it costs.

WEDDING 2

"Made and loved by God"

Psalm 33:1-15, 20-22

I guess by now many of you are hanging out for the wedding reception. One of the great things about wedding receptions is all the nice things get said:

- * the best man to bridesmaids
- * the bridesmaids to the groomsmen
- * the father of bride: his little girl has grown up; a few funnies; she's very special
- * the father of the groom: he's proud of his son; his achievements; and his greatest achievement - finding a wife
- * the groom: he thanks everybody; he's disorganised; he forgets Aunt Mavis who did the flowers.
- * the bride: the full list - the cake, the dresses, everyone in the service...

And , so it goes on. It's a great time, a real highlight. The bride and grooms' great chance to be the centre of attention. And why not? It's a once in a lifetime experience. But, that's for the reception. Right now the telegrams, toasts, compliments and praises should go to someone else. Not to Louise, not to Mark. But to the one who organised this day. The one whose idea it was. The matchmaker. The one who set up the circumstances to make this day happen.

It wasn't me! It wasn't the parents - as far as I know it wasn't an arranged marriage! It wasn't anyone you can see sitting in this room. Though he did send a telegram. Louise and Mark asked for it to be printed in your order of service. Turn to page 6 with me. Read Psalm 33 verses 1-3.

God is the one behind this day. God is the one we should be complimenting, thanking, praising. I should ask you to charge your glasses and drink a toast to God. Maybe we could later! Why? Well, there are many reasons. But let me highlight just a couple.

READ verses 6-9. Its a beautiful day outside, isn't it? Don't you stand in awe of the God who made all this? The outback, the oceans, the barrier reef, the Blue Mountains, gardens and rivers, birds and animals, stars and planets - God made the lot.

I have enough trouble making something out of lego - with instructions. But God has made the most vast and complex, minute and detailed universe. Everything that exists owes its existence to God.

It's worth stopping and thinking about this today. If it's true, then it's not something you can hold at arms length. It becomes intensely personal for each and everyone of us. Because what it means is that God made you - Mark and Louise - you and you and you.

You didn't just happen. You're not just a random meaningless collection of atoms. You're not just the outcome of a passionate encounter between your father and mother. You are made by God. You are his. You belong to him. You are his creation. The next time you look at yourself in the mirror, ask yourself the question "What are you looking at? "You're looking at a person made by God.

The first reason God deserves the praise, is that he made us, he made everything that is.

The second reason, is that we are not just made by God and forgotten. God remains intimately committed to and interested in his creation. READ verses 13-15.

Bette Midler sings a song "God is watching us from a distance". She pictures a god who is hands off, semi-interested, keeps his distance. No! God is very much involved. He is actively working out his purposes in the lives of people. READ verse 11
God wants good for his world. READ verse 5. God loves this world. God loves the people in this world. READ verse 4. God is faithful. God is unfailing in his love. And God keeps his promises.

How do we know that? Because he has made good every promise he has ever made.

2000 years ago - God demonstrated his commitment to us.

2000 years ago - God demonstrated how much he loves us.

He sent Jesus Christ his only Son. And he came to die instead of you and me. A great swap took place. We had wandered away from God. We deserved God's judgement. But Jesus hung upon the cross in our place. He took the steps to buy us back. He brought us into God's family.

This is great love at great cost. And it is intensely personal. God loves you - Mark and Louise.

Here are two very good reasons why God deserves all the honour and praise today:

(1) He made us. We are his creation.

(2) He loves us. Jesus has died in our place. God has adopted us into his family.

Mark and Louise, I want to say to you, these are two things well worth remembering this day. But not just this day. Each and every day of your married life:

God made you.

God loves you.

And apply it to each other. Mark as you look at Louise, remember God made her and God loves her. Louise as you look at Mark, remember God made him and God loves him.

Mark and Louise, I know you have great hopes for your marriage together;

- * that it will be long, enriching, and happy
- * that you'll grow closer day by day, year by year, as best friends and lovers
- * that you'll share your lives with children and raise them well
- * that you'll provide a warm and open home to family and friends
- * that you'll put each other's needs before your own

If these are your hopes - and they are great hopes indeed - we share them with you. Our prayer is that you will have this and more in your marriage together. But as you remember your Lord and Saviour, the one who made you and loves you, so you must be reminded to place your hope firmly in him. He is the one who will provide all your needs. READ verse 20. I hope these can be your words together.

Mark and Louise, today is a big day. You are taking a very large step of trust. Each of you have made big promises. Let me remind you of them. READ THE WEDDING VOWS. Each of you has placed your lives in the hands of the other. A great deal of trust involved. You are each depending on the other to keep their promises.

Our prayer is that you will both keep your promises, that you will prove trustworthy, and that as you celebrate your golden wedding anniversary on 4/1/2047 you can look back and say "Yes, I've been faithful".

But again, each day, as you remember the one who made you and loves you, so you should remember to put your trust in him. READ verse 21. I hope you can make these your words.

And finally, that you might make this your prayer for your marriage. READ verse 22. And I invite the congregation to join me in making this our prayer for you both:

Dear Father, who made us and who loves us, may your unfailing love rest upon Mark and Louise in their marriage together, O LORD, as together they put their hope in you. Amen.

WEDDING 3

"Made for each other?"

Colossians 1:13-23

When it comes to weddings, you don't want to make mistakes. You don't want to get to the honeymoon and discover you've married the wrong person. There was a bloke in the Bible who did that! Marcus... take care!

How can you make sure you've married the right person? How do you know when a couple are right for each other? Traditionally, people have said differences are good - there's complementarity. Nowadays people seem to look for sameness, like on Perfect Match that used to be on TV. People are looking for compatibility.

A phrase that often gets used at weddings is "THEY WERE MADE FOR EACH OTHER." I'm sure we all know couples we'd say that about. They both like football, sewing, children, cooking; they have the same length of hair! But that's all pretty trivial.

Sometimes we can see in others: like a guy who wants to be a missionary in Egypt meets a Christian girl from Egypt who wants to go back there. I guess you're all wondering "What about Kelly and Marcus?" Some of you have known them for a long time - family, friends. They look great together. They're both committed Christians. They're both headed in the same direction.

But, I've got to say, Marcus and Kelly are definitely not made for each other. Not because one likes football and the other doesn't. Not because one likes heavy metal and the other Abba. Not because one is noisy and the other is quiet. Not because they have very different family backgrounds. I didn't discover it from pre-marriage counselling. I discovered it from the Bible - from the passage we read from Colossians.

Marcus and Kelly are both made for someone else. The same someone else. "All things were created by him and for him." For Jesus Christ. Everything. That includes you and me, Marcus and Kelly. We were all created by Jesus and for Jesus.

Think about it. You have been created, made, manufactured - for a purpose. When you open your presents, if you get a toaster and an iron, don't mix them up. They've each been made for a purpose!

We too have been made for a purpose. Marcus and Kelly, you've been made for a purpose. You have been made for Jesus. If you've been made for Jesus, then live for Jesus. Jesus is to be number one. Put Jesus first in your marriage. Not the presents. Not your jobs. Not your home. Not your hobbies. Not your children. Not even each other. That's an extraordinary thing to say, isn't it?

Here I am, marrying you both. It's a Christian wedding. And I'm telling you, "You're not made for each other." "You're not to put each other first." Who has the right to be more important? What person can possibly be more important to Marcus than Kelly; to Kelly than Marcus? Doesn't sound right, does it? We know instinctively that we are to put each other first. But the Word of God says 'No! Jesus is more important.'

Who is he? And why should we put him number one? And how can we say we've been made for him? First, he was a 1st century Jew, from the backwaters of the middle east.

But more importantly he is "the image of the invisible God." And "all things were created by him and for him." And "in him all things hold together." He's "the beginning and firstborn from the dead." And in the passage there you see words like "supremacy". "All the fullness of God". He's the one who "made peace between God and us through his death on the cross."

Back in the first century something extraordinary must have happened to convince people that a Jewish carpenter, an itinerant preacher was the Lord, the Saviour, the God over all.

Marcus and Kelly, something extraordinary has happened to you. You have heard the good news. You, too, treat Jesus as Lord, Saviour, God.

Marcus and Kelly, if I told you that you were made for each other; to put each other first in your marriage; I'd be misleading you and sabotaging your marriage from the start.

If you put yourselves first, it will be a disaster. If you put each other first, then you will not be headed in the same direction. But if you both put Jesus first; if you continually acknowledge you've been made for him; then your marriage will grow strong and God will provide you with a deep and lasting joy. More importantly, God will be honoured and you will be the people you were made to be.

WEDDING 4

"So much to Remember"

Deuteronomy 4:39-40

When it comes to weddings there is so much to remember.

- * arrange a church and someone to marry you - done that
- * what to wear; whether to buy, rent, or make - done that
- * hanky?
- * rings?
- * confetti?
- * marriage certificates?
- * flowers, music, cars, ushers?

Invitations are always a headache...

- * relatives, friends, where to sit, have we missed anyone?
- * and if we invite Mavis, does that mean we have to invite Joe?

So much to remember, it's incredible that people ever get married at all!

And that's just the beginning. After that there's the honeymoon.

- * Have you booked?
- * do you know how to get there?
- * have you packed all the right things?

Then there's the presents.

- * Can you remember who gave what
- * you don't want to be thanking people for the wrong present
- * you don't want to be getting something you don't like and then giving it back to the people who gave it to you!

There's a lot to remember when it comes to weddings. The questions we need to ask are:-

"What are the important things?"

"What should you really take to heart this day?"

Do you need to remember who's here? That's important. It's nice to remember. Photos help. Do you need to remember who did what? That's important too. You want to be able to say thankyou. But is there something more important, something you should never forget? YOUR VOWS. They are important.

Andrew and Sarah you have said to me - to each of us here - there is something even MORE important than that. Turn back in your programmes. Andrew and Sarah wanted me to read this. READ Deut verses 39-40

What's going on here? These are strange words to read at a wedding; even

stranger to preach on! This is a big day in the life of Israel. A day they had been waiting 40 years for. Let me give you a very quick history lesson: A long time ago... the time of the pyramids... slaves in Egypt... Moses... the people of Israel set free... promised land... 11 day hike... but it took 40 years. They disobeyed God... grumbled and complained... even turned to other gods. Finally, 40 years later, another opportunity to enter the promised land.

The message is "THIS TIME, GET IT RIGHT!" These are important words: "Take them to heart"

Andrew and Sarah, this is a big day for you. Take to heart these words. If you remember nothing else this day, remember these words. What does he say? READ verse 39

The One who made you, the One who saved you from slavery in Egypt, the One you call the LORD - he is the God of the whole universe, in fact, no other God exists.

Andrew and Sarah, the one who made you, saved you from your sins (selfishness, death, separation from God) - he is the God of the whole universe.

We have come here today before God. Grasp who he is. This is saying that God is God everywhere. There is nowhere that he is not God. He is not just God over Australia, Canberra. But also over Pakistan, Korea, Africa, Europe. He is not just God over religious people. But God over all, whether they go to church or not. He is not just God over certain types of activities such as prayer, Bible study, singing. But he is God over life at work, study, cooking, cleaning, shopping, sexual relationship, sport.

Israel were called to remember the God who saved them. Andrew and Sarah, you are called to remember the God who saved you. The one who created this universe. The One who rescued Israel, who gave his only Son to die, who raised Jesus from the dead; the One you read about in the Bible, who you both know personally... HE IS GOD OVER ALL.

READ verse 39-40. God speaks to his people. Israel had heard God on the mountain. They had been given the ten commandments. They are going to hear God speak again. Moses addresses them, "This is the way fellas." "You want the good life, you want the best you can get? Then listen up!"

Again, this is pretty remote, ancient history. How does God speak to us now?

- * is there a divine internet?
- * does he speak to the super spiritual people only?
- * is there some kind of 'extra spiritual perception'?
- * is it just a matter of looking within yourself?

God made his word absolutely clear - in JESUS CHRIST - there's the full expression of himself. And God will continue to speak to you, Andrew and Sarah, in his written down, living and active word - the BIBLE.

And the message here is GOD'S WORD OFFERS YOU THE BEST WAY TO LIVE. Andrew and Sarah, you want the absolute best that marriage has to offer. I want it for you. Your

parents want it for you. Everyone here wants it for you. What will give it to you? The answer is OBEDIENCE TO THE WORD OF GOD.

Doesn't sound that clever, that sophisticated, does it? It's not like "10 steps to a perfect marriage". Or "The 7 habits of highly effective partnerships." It's just the Bible. It's unpopular. Some will ridicule the idea of the Bible offering the way to live. They'll say it's out of date, culture bound, oppressive to women, restrictive to men, idealistic, superstitious, nonsense, irrelevant. There will be many challenges. You will be tempted NOT to believe that God's way is best.

It will come in many forms. You will be told you need equal rights, to draw line. But you're to give up your rights to serve each other. You'll be told to be assertive. But you're called to be humble. You'll be told to chase after financial security. But you're called to store up treasures in heaven. You'll be persuaded to think that sex is about self gratification. But God says it's a profound expression of love for your partner. You'll be encouraged to stay together only as long as love lasts. But God says to love continually so the marriage does last.

The pressures will get subtle. You'll be told to put each other first. But God says put him first.

Andrew and Sarah, you also chose Ephesians 5:22-33 to be read. It offers the best advice on marriage available today. GIVE A VERY BRIEF SUMMARY.

You know these things to be true. You chose this passage to be read. Fill your minds with these words. They're not popular. They're not considered 'enlightened'. They're not '90s. They're not where it's at.

But Andrew and Sarah, don't be conned. This is EXACTLY WHERE IT'S AT. The blueprint for the best marriage you could ever have. Read it, memorise it, study it, talk about it together. But most of all, PUT IT INTO PRACTICE. In fact, put the whole of God's word into practise"so that it may go well with you and your children."

Andrew and Sarah, as you look back on today, don't worry if you can't remember everyone who's here. I wouldn't even worry if you forget exactly who did what.

But, please remember this. The God who sent his son, Jesus, to save you, is God over everything - there is no other. And remember - following his Word is the best way to live.

David McDonald is the pastor of CrossRoads Christian Church in Canberra, and AFES chaplain to students at Canberra University and ANU.

davemcd@ozemail.com.au

AND A FUNERAL...

When it comes to knowing what comes after death, MURRAY FRASER says we should ask the expert.

Here's the full text of a funeral sermon based on **John 11:25...**

ASK THE EXPERT

I once read a poem about death. And it described death this way. It said that we are like ships. When we die we disappear over the horizon. The ship gets smaller and smaller, - but on the other side, the ship gets bigger and bigger, until it berths on the other shore. Death is a journey.

Others say that's wrong. When we are buried, that's the end. We cease to exist. The curtain falls. The full time siren sounds. The game's over.

Some will tell you that we come back to earth in another life form. If we've behaved ourselves we'll come back as someone better, if we misbehave, we may come back in another life form, such as a beetle, or a dog.

Others look for answers from those who have died on the operating table and been resuscitated. There has been a lot of research into this. Kerry Packer for example technically died, and he now tells us there's nothing on the other side.

But he's rather the exception. Most people report something. Typically they report a sensation of hovering above their bed, and watching the nurses and doctors work on their bodies. They are kind of detached from this life. And they report seeing a bright light. Some report seeing a place that they reckon must be heaven. Sounds great. But an American cardiologist has just written a book about others who report bad experiences.

Well who's right? It's one of those questions that nobody can speak about with much authority. Because no-one has ever come back from the dead to tell us about it. Even those who've apparently died may not be of much help either. In fact, some argue that these people haven't actually died, that there's some physiological explanation for the light they see, something like the body shutting down.

So who's got the answers? I reckon we need answers from someone who has been dead long enough for there to be no question that he died. Not someone who had a near death experience for a minute or two, but someone who was crucified, dead and buried. Stone cold dead for three days. I'd be interested to hear what he had to say.

Jesus fits the bill. And to show it wasn't make believe, He appeared to more than 500 witnesses after his resurrection. And he had enough credibility that many of these witnesses died defending their belief that they saw him risen from the dead.

At this point you may feel like turning off, and saying he's going to ram it down our throats. I'm not going to do that. Its not up to me to prove it to you. I can't do that. No-

one can. But I want to suggest that you owe it to yourself to check out what Jesus said about life and death.

You can test the claims of Jesus for yourself.

All the other theories will only be proved when you die. Only then will you find out whether you've been sold a lemon, and then it's too late. But you can test what Jesus had to say on this earth, and discover if it's true on this earth, before you die. It makes a lot of sense. Jesus said: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

It's a big claim. Here's a bloke who actually says, if you trust in me, you will not die. The body might stop operating, but you will live with me forever in heaven.

What does the word "believe" mean? It means to trust. Trust and believe were the same word when the bible was first written. Friends, Jesus is the expert about death. When it comes to death, he says you can trust me. Because one thing is clear - our only hope of heaven is Jesus. He died so we could be forgiven. He died to open the door to heaven, and close the door to hell.

But it's no good just knowing these things. It's like a person in trouble on the water. They see a life raft two meters away. It can save them. It's there. They believe it's there. But it doesn't do any good unless the person comes to the life raft and comes on board. Friends, come on board with Jesus. You may believe him. Now trust in him. Trust that his death can save you from the judgment. In other words, respond. Become his follower.

What does that mean? I've spoken of coming on board with Jesus, of being His follower. It means that we turn our lives over to God. It means we were heading along this way in life, and we change direction, and start to live life God's way.

It's simply being honest. It's saying that we aren't perfect. My wife can tell you that about me, and we're all in the same boat. And therefore we need forgiveness. We need to turn back to God. That's the choice.

Jesus said: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Murray Fraser is the minister of the Presbyterian Church in Walcha, NSW