

HOMILY FOR MASS OF THE 28TH SUNDAY ORDINARY TIME YEAR A St. Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, 15 October 2017

My favourite film this year has been Mel Gibson's *Hacksaw Ridge*. Andrew Garfield brilliantly plays Desmond Doss, a medic who was the first conscientious objector to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor. The film explores how he maintained his principles in three hostile contexts: the terrible Battle of Okinawa between the U.S. and Japan; the conflict between the conscience of a pacifist and his comrades' expectation that he will "have their back"; and the internal struggle between conflicting duties to God and country, mates and self.

The first half of the film shows young Desmond growing up in a mid-Western pastoral idyll, "vibrant and sunny and green." This contrasts sharply with the brutal second half, which contains "visceral and well-choreographed battle scenes... sharp-edged and industrial, muddy and hellish and grey."¹ We are drawn to ponder how people can maintain their ideals when transferred to such an unfamiliar and unsupportive context. Doss manages to reconcile these things in an extraordinary act of life-saving. But this poses the question of how to present the Gospel in a culture that increasingly regards Christian views on many things – especially on sexuality, marriage and reverence for life – as arcane, even harmful? In a culture which for all its putative open-mindedness is less and less tolerant of Christianity, how will we ensure in the years ahead that people in parishes, schools and other institutions are free to speak and practice their beliefs? How will we maintain a sense of who we are and what matters most to us when some others barely tolerate us or even vilify and bully us?



These questions are particularly pertinent as we approach the final strait of the national marriage survey. As we examine our own consciences on how to 'vote', if we've not done so already, or on how we voted, if we have, we might ask ourselves this question: *Is the Christian understanding of marriage peculiar to Christian believers?* My thought is no and yes. *No*, because marriage is demonstrably a natural institution; but *YES*, because we Christians have a particular take on marriage which makes it especially crucial to us. Let me explain...

The life-long pairing of a man and a woman as the foundation of a family is found in every religion, culture, society and polity we know of through the millennia of human history. It is by no means a monopoly of Christians. To this day it is international law and the civil law of 9 out of 10 countries. When you next hear on the ABC that Australia is "the last English-speaking country to embrace same-sex marriage" remember that, according to the ABC's own *FactCheck* site, "out of 70 countries and self-governing areas that have English as an official language, only 14 have legalized same-sex marriage".²

We can, I believe, give good arguments from philosophy, history, science, art and law for the classical view of marriage. Human beings are capable of living and breathing, eating and drinking, thinking and feeling, choosing and acting, all by themselves; but there is one human capacity each of us only has half of: the capacity to reproduce. Only by joining with a person *of the opposite sex* can we procreate. And if the children that commonly result from people doing what husbands and wives do are to have both mother and father, devoted to each other and to them over the long haul, we need an institution like marriage. Marriage is that 'comprehensive' union of minds and bodies,

lives and resources, that creates the identity of spouse and mission of parent and supports the family that naturally results.

Sadly our marriage 'debate' has rarely touched on what marriage is, what it's for. We've had slogans like "love is love" but not every kind of love is marriage. Nor, if we are honest, is every marriage especially loving, at least all the time. Of course, we all know and love people with same-sex attraction and we want only the best for them. We want them to love and be loved. We are not saying anything against them, or against single parents or anyone else, when we say we think it's best for kids, as far as possible, to have the benefit of a Mum and Dad, and that's what marriage is about.



There's much more to be said about all this and I've written or spoken elsewhere, as have many others. The arguments are essentially secular ones. But our religious faith adds another dimension. Jesus loved talking about marriage and attending weddings. He often used wedding receptions as examples, like He does in today's Gospel (*Mt 22:1-14*), to teach important things about life in God's kingdom. He was explicit about what He meant by marriage: "a man leaves his mother and father and cleaves to his wife so the two become one flesh" (*Mk 19:5-6*). He taught that this was how God intended things *from the beginning* (cf. *Gen 2:24*) – in other words, what God wrote into our human nature – and He tried to renew that institution as permanent and life-giving. St Paul compared the relationship between man and wife with that of Christ and his Church – a union of opposites but hopefully so faithful and fruitful it can be a *sacrament* (*Eph 5:21-33*). Only last weekend I was at a meeting with Pope Francis in Rome where he said it would be a big mistake for us to ignore the complementarity between the sexes in marriage and elsewhere.³

Of course, there are many other kinds of friendships, and we are right in general to honour these. But the state has no business telling us who we should love and how, sexually or otherwise, and for how long, let alone for life, to be validating and registering, upholding or divorcing those relationships. Governments should, in general, keep out of the friendship business and out of the bedroom. The only kind of friendship the state has a proper interest in recognising and regulating is heterosexual marriage, because that's what leads to children – new citizens – and gives them the best start in life.

Likewise, it's no business of the Church to be ritualising other relationships: the only kind that can be a *natural* marriage and, if between two baptised people, a *sacramental* one is that between a man and wife. But if we do not have a ritual or sacrament for other friendships, we are not saying they are less, or unworthy of support, or not genuine: we are simply recognising that they are not marriage.



People have pushed us very hard in recent times to choose between loving same-sex attracted people and loving real marriage. I've said we shouldn't have to choose. It's OK to say NO to redefining marriage while at the same time saying NO to prejudice and hatred against anyone. We can continue to support laws and customs that honour man and wife becoming one flesh, while also respecting and caring for all. That was Christ's way.

Sadly, the ideologues paint religious believers as homophobes and try to shut us out of the debates for the soul of our culture and the definition of crucial institutions. If overseas experience is anything to go by, if marriage is redefined it will be very hard to speak up for real marriage anymore in schools, at work, socially. Traditional believers will be vulnerable to discrimination suits and other kinds of bullying for their beliefs. Some may lose their jobs, promotions, businesses, political careers. Commentators on both sides of this issue recognize that it has implications for religious freedom, and for other freedoms of conscience, association, education, employment and so on.⁴ So it is not unreasonable for people to say that until freedom of religion protections are in place, we cannot support any change to marriage laws.

At Hacksaw Ridge Desmond Doss had to make some hard choices, between worldly regard and godliness, between sticking to his principles and selling out to go with the flow. He found a way to be true to his beliefs without being bigoted or bitter; indeed, being true to his ideals drove him to heroic compassion towards others and self-sacrifice on their behalf. However the marriage debate pans out, I pray people will be able to say of us that we maintained ***clarity*** about real marriage while demonstrating ***charity*** towards all. God bless our country and its voters with such clarity and charity.

¹ Brett McCracken, "Hacksaw Ridge: The bloody, true story of faith in action," *Christianity Today* 3 November 2016

² <http://www.abc.net.au/news/factcheck/2017-08-25/fact-check-english-speaking-countries-same-sex-marriage/8827842>

³ Pope Francis, *Address to the Pontifical Academy for Life*, 7 October 2017.

⁴ For a discussion of the serious consequences for religious believers eventuating from the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Canada, a country which explicitly affirms the rights to freedom of religion, conscience, association and speech in its *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, see the following analysis by Canadian lawyer Leah Singh, "Same-sex marriage and the persecution of Christians in Canada", *Crisis*, 28 May, 2015. <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2015/same-sex-marriage-and-the-persecution-of-christians-in-canada>.