

What happens to a Vow when it is broken?

(John Miller - at Canongate Kirk, Edinburgh, 29 April 2017)

Introduction

Like the two earlier speakers I think of myself as greatly privileged in having been invited to address your Annual Meeting today. For you are a unique company, a unique community. For you have all, each of you, been through the same experience. As has been confirmed for me in conversations I have already had over lunch today, although the circumstances and events of your lives have all been entirely different, the central experience has been identical. You are all bound together by an event which all of you wish had never happened.

My two colleagues here today have worked in particular spheres different from my own. John has been involved for many years in the central offices of the Church of Scotland, in the Ministries Department, meeting large number of ministers at critical periods of their lives. And David for some years was the Presbytery Clerk of Glasgow - Glasgow is the largest Presbytery of the Church of Scotland. Their work brought them into contact with ministers and their families, who were experiencing sad situations like those which are known to you. I, on the other hand, was always a Parish minister, working with people who were not ministers. My experience was in one single parish, a housing scheme - a housing estate - in Glasgow, and I was there for almost forty years. I am going to bring you today four fragments, reflecting on what happens to a Vow when it is broken.

A broken Vow

When I started out in the Parish I was taking about fifty marriage services each year. I remember the very first marriage service I conducted. I had done my best to prepare the young couple and myself for the great occasion, and on the Wedding Day they repeated the wonderful Vows to each other with great solemnity and awe. But the marriage did not survive the honeymoon. On their Wedding night the new husband beat his new wife very violently. Before the honeymoon week was completed the marriage was over. The girl had returned home to her parents. The violence, it seemed to me, had killed the vows. Nothing was left of the commitment which had been expressed in the vows.

A Persistent Vow

Being in the same parish for so many years, it was only a matter of time before I was approached by someone who wanted me to marry them for a second time. I had conducted the service at their first marriage. The marriage had ended in divorce. Now a new hope had arisen, and the lady asked me if I would take the service for the new marriage. I was quite unsure about what to do. We do have careful procedures about remarrying someone divorced, and I consulted our

Presbytery Clerk for advice. But I agreed to conduct the service. I can still remember what happened when I was reading the passage of scripture I had chosen. It was some verses from the Book of Ruth: *'Your people will be my people. Where you go I will go; where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.'* As I read those words I can still hear the sharp intake of breath from the bride - *'Huh.....!'* - as the effect of those words reminded her of the commitment she had made in her first marriage. In my insensitivity I had chosen this Reading which now confronted her. Her earlier Vow was still alive, even though her first and former husband had put his commitment to death.

A Minister's two Vows to God

Ministers and their spouses face a particular difficulty. For a minister can make two Vows. There ought, of course, to be no conflict between Two Vows made to God. But for a Minister the Vow of Marriage sits alongside the Vow of Ministry. Other traditions will have similar formulations for their clergy, but I am thinking of one of the questions that a Minister in the Church of Scotland is asked to answer at Ordination;

Are not zeal for the glory of God, and a desire for the salvation of all people, so far as you know your own heart your great motives and chief inducements to enter this holy ministry?

This is the expression of a huge commitment. Almost every married minister will face the tension which arises when the two vows make demands at the same time. I will not be the only minister who paused to answer the phone when rushing out the door. I was hurrying to be at my wife's bedside as she gave birth to our second daughter. On the phone was a person who said they were going to kill themselves. I talked to them for a few minutes. But 44 years later I am ashamed to be known in the family as having failed to be present at the birth of daughter Anna.

You will be familiar with the pattern of callers at the door and on the phone being given priority over vital family matters. Not unusual for the minister to be absent from family birthdays, to interrupt family holidays, to leave the Christmas dinner-table, in fulfilment of the Vows of Ministry, effectively demeaning the vows of Marriage. It won't do. Ministers must be disciplined.

The Sorrow of it all

I have an old friend I visit each week. He is in his mid-90s. He's a minister of the Church of Scotland. He's physically frail, but his mind, his eyes, his ears, are in perfect working order. He says he is dying to die. He wishes he was dead, and if he could do it he would hurry himself away. He can see no point in his life. I remember him saying one day that something terrible had happened in the Home in which he was resident.

'Dreadful,' he said. *'A woman was brought in today. She is 107.'*

I have to confess that I found myself roaring with laughter. To his credit, my old friend eventually laughed too.

But I like to tell him what I am doing, and last week I told him I had been invited to speak to this meeting. Did he have any guidance for me?

What he said really has given me a proper context for everything I say. For after thinking for a little he said, 'It's the sorrow of it all that I see.' And I knew that he was right.

My early and continuing contacts with Broken Rites have allowed me to see that your lives are filled with achievement and with the triumph of courage and hope. But thanks to my old friend, that minister in his mid-90s who thinks his life has no purpose, I am more than ever aware of the sorrow through which you have all come, the sorrow with which you have to do battle day by day.

So I salute the work of Broken Rites, and I thank you for the opportunity to be one of your speakers today.