

“The Forever Conversation”

UK National Marriage Week 2020 11th – 17th May.

Introduction

“The Forever Conversation” – that’s the theme of Marriage Week this year – “The Forever Conversation”.

What do you think when you hear that phrase? I don’t know about you, but I find it so evocative – so packed with meaning.

It makes me think not only of our relationships with each other, but also about God, and the relationship he desires to have with each one of us.

And that’s not surprising, is it? Because, at their best, all our relationships are an echo, a reflection of the ultimate Relationship that is to be found in God.

So, we’re going to start by thinking about “the forever conversation” as it relates to God, and then move on to thinking about it in our relationships with each other – although even there we’ll be finding those echoes of that ultimate Relationship in Him.

So, my hope is that whether you are in a relationship or not, or are looking for a relationship or not, you will find something here to help and encourage you.

God

So, to begin with God.

In the beginning...

And, of course, that’s where it does all begin.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. (John 1:1-2)

In the beginning was the Word.

In the beginning was the Source of all conversation.

In the beginning was the Ultimate Conversation.

In the beginning was the true Forever Conversation.

The Conversation of Love that has gone on – and now goes on – and will go on – within the Godhead – between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – from first to last – from beginning to end – for all eternity.

Join in...

But this is not some private conversation. Rather it is one that we are all invited to join.

It's a conversation that begins with the message of Creation:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. (Psalm 19:1-2)

This all is part of God's "forever conversation" with us – with all people throughout all time. Creation, speaking to us of God and his glory.

Then, of course, God speaks directly to individuals. We read about this throughout the Bible; and many of us know it too – in perhaps less distinct and dramatic ways – in our own lives.

But more than all of this, so great is God's desire for us to be a part of this Forever Conversation, that He himself came to invite us to join in. As John puts it:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (John 1:14)

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the origin of the word "conversation" has the sense of "living among, familiarity, intimacy".

So, when Jesus – the Word made flesh – made his dwelling among us, he came to "converse" with us – not simply to speak with us, but to live among us, to be familiar with us, to be intimate with us.

And his invitation is that we "converse" with God. That, like Moses, God would speak to us "face to face, as one speaks to a friend." (Exodus 33:11) But more, much more than this: that we would be familiar with God and intimate with God; that we would live with God and live in God. For as Jesus said:

"You will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you." (John 14:20)

The Word came into the world to speak of an everlasting kingdom (Psalm 145:13) and of a Love that endures forever (Psalm 136). Jesus engages us in a conversation that speaks to us of forever and calls us into his Forever Conversation of Love.

Us

So, what might this mean for us, and our relationships with each other?

On the Marriage Week website there are three sets of questions that are designed to help us think about "the forever conversation" – whether you're single or just started dating; been in a relationship for a couple of years or more; or married or in a Civil Partnership.

They're titled "Let's Talk...10 Questions on the way to forever!"

I thought I'd take a few of those questions and use them to help us think about the "forever conversation" – and particularly within the context of how these things echo and reflect the relationship that God desires with us.

So hopefully, even if you are not in, or aspiring to, a "forever relationship" you will still find this helpful and encouraging.

Let's begin with a few questions that help us consider the *character* of the person we might wish to spend our lives with.

Are they willing to make sacrifices for you?

Does this person voluntarily choose to put you first – to put your needs above their own? And do they do this, not grudgingly – because they feel they must – but gladly – because they desire and delight in your happiness and wellbeing?

Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus:

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 5:1-2)

Jesus loves us so much that he gave himself for us, sacrificed his life for us.

We can commit ourselves to him, because his willingness to make this ultimate sacrifice demonstrates "how wide and long and high and deep" is his love for us (Ephesians 3:18) – and that he desires our good in all things. As Jesus said:

"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10)

Paul urges us to "follow God's example" in giving ourselves up in love for others. Of course, we will always fall far short of Jesus' self-sacrificial life – but in God's grace it is what we aspire to.

Making sacrifices is a very real and practical demonstration of love – and so it is appropriate that we look for this in someone we might spend a lifetime with.

Are they kind to you and to other people?

Kindness is so important, isn't it?

The Oxford Dictionary defines kindness as "the quality of being friendly, generous, and considerate."

That might not sound like much – but really, it's everything. Jesus put it like this:

"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 7:12)

“Do to others what you would have them do to you.” Be kind.

We can commit to a forever relationship with God because he is kind to us:

“I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.” (Jeremiah 31:3)

And similarly, when thinking about a “forever relationship” with a partner, we will undoubtedly want them to be someone who shows kindness to us, and kindness to others.

Do they hold short accounts or are they likely to hold grudges?

In every relationship there are – sadly but inevitably – times when things go wrong. When – intentionally or unintentionally – we hurt each other. Sometimes these things will be comparatively trivial, and hopefully soon forgotten; others may shake the relationship to its very foundations.

But even seemingly trivial things have the potential to undermine a relationship, if the memories and the hurt are not let go of. Like bricks placed one atop the other, eventually they can build a wall that separates the couple as much as any major hurt.

So, it is absolutely vital that we hold short accounts with each other. That we don’t hold on to our hurts or dredge up past offences. We are all far from perfect. We all make mistakes. And, so, we need – as far as we are able – to treat each other with grace and compassion.

And, perhaps most important of all, we need to remember how precious our relationship is, and to value it above our supposed “right” to feel hurt.

And again, in this we are simply echoing the way in which God treats us:

“I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.” (Isaiah 43:25)

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. ⁽²⁾
Corinthians 5:19a)

Do they take an interest in your work, family and life in general?

I guess we’ve all met people who are just a little too self-absorbed - who seem to want to talk only about themselves, and rarely about us, or others, or the wider world.

A relationship must be two-way. If it’s all one-sided then it’s not a relationship. If someone cares about us, then they will want to know about us – about who we are, and how we are, and what we think, and what we do. And similarly, if they care about others, and the wider world, then that will be demonstrated by them taking a genuine interest.

We all need to be noticed; we need to be known. This is what we seek in our relationships, and this is what we find in God:

"You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways." (Psalm 139:1-3)

"And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered." (Matthew 10:30)

Are they aspirational about the future?

This doesn't necessarily mean that they are ambitious to achieve and acquire – but rather that they have hopes and dreams for the kind of life you could make together. And it is important to know that you want the same things – not in detail, necessarily, but certainly "big picture". Sadly, marriages can be broken over differing desires – for children, for example. You want to be journeying together, not pulling in opposite directions.

God is aspirational about the future! Through the prophet Jeremiah he spoke these well-known words of reassurance to his people in exile:

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:11)

Even more arresting are God's plans for the ultimate future for all things:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'" (Revelation 21:3-4)

Is this a relationship that could last forever?

The main idea behind the "forever conversation" is that there comes a point in every long-term relationship when it is appropriate to ask, "could this last forever?" Rather than simply drifting along, it's time to make a clear decision and – if that decision is "yes" – to commit to each other, and to a lifetime together, and to "set sail" for that "forever" future.

The very act of making that commitment gives a security that allows the adventure to take place – because both partners know that, whatever difficulties are encountered on the way, they are resolved to making it work. As the marriage service puts it so beautifully and tellingly:

...for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.

And we have that same assurance in our relationship with God:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all

creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Romans 8:38-39)

When would we be ready to make a forever commitment?

That's a good question! And the answer will be different for every individual and every couple. Only they will know if, and when, the time is right to make such a commitment.

Nonetheless, the question is there. And it is a question God that asks of us, as he calls us deeper into a forever relationship with him. As Jesus said so often, *"Come, follow me."* Come closer. Be with me. Get to know me. Receive my love for you. And share it with the world.

How do we show our love to each other within the daily rhythms of life and routines?

At the start of a relationship couples have an instinctive desire to demonstrate their love for each other: they give each other cards and gifts and flowers; they go out for romantic meals and other special times together; they're forever thinking of each other and how they can make each other happy.

But then, as time goes on and the couple settle into their relationship, there's a tendency for such things to happen less often. And that's not altogether wrong. A relationship cannot be all "moonlight & roses." Yes, it's important not to lose the romance and the special times altogether – but equally, there's everyday life to be lived.

It's comparatively easy to be loving in those special times – rather harder in the day-to-day realities of life. But that's where true love is shown – through the way we are with each other in the "ordinary, everyday" moments – though being thoughtful, kind and considerate in the "little things" of life, and seeking to make our partner happy in the midst of the daily rhythms and routines.

The singer-songwriter Paul Bell puts it beautifully and amusingly in his song, *What I Call Romance*:

*I'll let you choose the pizza topping
Stay up and talk with you for hours
I'll use the appropriate board for chopping
It means as much as buying flowers*

*I'll make the tea and then wash up
I'll ask you if you'd care to dance
I'll hold your hair while you throw up
Now that is what I call romance*

Similarly, in our "life of faith" we may long for those special moments when we sense God's presence and love for us. And yet, God is continually demonstrating his love for us, in the

“everyday” blessings of this life that we can so easily overlook. As Paul told the crowd in Lystra:

“[God] has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.” (Acts 14:17)

How much time do we set aside for one another each week?

Having said this, it is important to set aside time for the one we love. Otherwise, in the busyness of life, we can so easily allow other things to push them out. If we’re not intentional about spending time together, we can unintentionally drift apart.

Again, it’s the same for our relationship with God. As Luke tells us, even Jesus – perhaps especially Jesus – needed this, for:

[He] often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. (Luke 5:16)

Now I’m not talking solely about what we might think of as a classic daily “quiet time” with Bible reading notes – although that is certainly helpful for some. Perhaps surprisingly, Wikipedia puts it rather well:

“Quiet Time... is a regular individual session of Christian spiritual activities, such as prayer, private meditation, contemplation, worship of God or study of the Bible.”

Though perhaps “activities” is not necessarily the right word, as for many of us the challenge is to learn to simply “sit with God” rather than trying to make something happen. As the Psalmist puts it:

Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him... He says, “Be still, and know that I am God...” (Psalm 37:7a, 46:10a)

How often do we put our partner before ourselves?

At first glance this might seem a repeat of a question we’ve already considered: Are they willing to make sacrifices for you? And yet notice the difference: we started by asking about our potential partner – now we turn the spotlight on ourselves. How often are we willing to make sacrifices for *them*? How often do we put *them* first?

If we’re not careful, this can become harder, not easier, as time goes on. We can start totting-up – even subconsciously – just how often we’ve put our partner before ourselves, compared with how often they’ve done so for us. And when we start doing that, it’s likely that the balance will come down on the wrong side as far as we’re concerned – not because we *are* more sacrificial necessarily, but because that’s how we perceive ourselves to be!

It is well to remember both the words and the example of Jesus:

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:12-13)

Hard as it can be, let us seek to show our love for each other by outdoing each other in putting our partner first, and not demanding that they do the same for us.

In what ways has our relationship grown and in what ways could it improve?

The joy of any relationship is the journey it takes us on. We will be changed because of it – hopefully for the better! We will not stay the same, and the relationship will not remain the same.

Michaela Hyde – Executive Director of Marriage Foundation and coordinator of UK National Marriage Week – said these wise words in an episode of ‘The M Word’ – the podcast that she makes with her husband Nick:

“There is no such thing as a perfect marriage. A really good marriage is made up of two people who are willing to make it better.”

Absolutely! No matter how good a marriage – or other committed relationship – might be, there is always room for improvement. And whilst things do grow if left to their own devices, they’re much more likely to *thrive* if given a bit of care and attention.

Without wishing to labour the point, it’s easy to see how this would apply to our relationship with God. Growth in our faith might not necessarily look how we’d expect – and can at times feel like the very opposite of growth.

But wherever we are on our faith journey we can look back on where we’ve come from, and where we are now, and where we might be heading – and look for ways that might help us improve that precious – yet often intangible – relationship with God.

Conclusion

Which brings us back to where we started, and the theme of Marriage Week: “The Forever Conversation.”

I hope that this talk has given you a glimpse of the riches contained within that phrase – and a desire to join the conversation.

So, whether you are single, just dating, in a long-term relationship, married or in a Civil Partnership, do check out the Marriage Week website for resources to help you with the “forever conversation,”

And do seek to enter deeper into the ultimate Forever Conversation with a God who loves you, and longs for you to truly know the width and length and height and depths of that love.