

**I** RECENTLY found myself at a social end-of-year lunch with a group of businessmen. As I had some talks to prepare on the subject, I took the opportunity (given that there wasn't a lot of business to discuss) to ask them from their own experiences what advice they might give to young people who were getting married.

One of them answered right away, "Never travel home from work together, especially not in the same car!" Well, I hadn't expected this particular comment, but it was accompanied by knowing looks and deeply-felt nods around the table, so there was clearly a point to be made. It was, in fact, the best they were able to come up with in the whole of the discussion that ensued!

So why not travel home together? Apparently it was a point about the different needs and temperaments of males and females, and the task of acclimatising to one another after having had different experiences during the day. A kind of 'buffer' was needed, it was felt, between one's life in the workplace and home, a period to prepare for 'reintegration' into domestic life. A shared journey home brings a clash of needs: the wife wants to talk about what has been going on (their words!), the husband wants to chill mindlessly or else to chew over something that took place during the day. The needs are different, and there needs to be adjustment. To slam the two needs together immediately after work in the small space of one car is to invite a clash and potentially spoil an evening.

Well, I follow the logic of this, and if this 'reintegration' is as tricky to navigate as these men evidently felt, then we should be glad to have the principles of Ephesians 5 and other scriptures to help us. The principle of submitting to one another, considering the other's needs and placing them above our own, as Christ did for the church, is tremendously powerful as a basis for governing our every interaction, not just coming home from work.

But let's consider reintegration a little further. Sometimes partners back themselves into a conversation in which they compete about who has had the worst day. In the cold light of day, this seems pretty foolish, yet it can certainly happen. It can be hard, especially if one's own day has been tough, simply to listen sympathetically without competing or getting annoyed. What is needed, of course, is fellowship and concern for the other. It works both ways. If one partner is constantly carping about his or her trials day after day

then it does indeed become selfish and an implicit criticism of the other partner for 'having it easy'. No one's life is 'plain sailing', we can be sure of that.

It is a tension that might arise particularly where one party is in commercial employment and the other stays at home, because the days of both partners and the pressures they face are so different. There can be the assumption, lurking murkily even if not stated explicitly, that one partner has it easy or doesn't know what the real world is like; or has forgotten what screaming kids are like, how soul-destroying is daily routine, or how demanding elderly relatives can be.

Sometimes both partners do seem to have had bad days on the same day, and this is when there is need for an extra helping of the love of Christ. To respond in any kind of way that shows lack of concern for the other's trials is to refuse to share the burden or engage in true fellowship. "I don't owe you anything", the attitude says, "and I'm not prepared to invest anything just now in terms of emotional response or support. You deal with your own problems. My life isn't easy either, and I have enough problems of my own".

It seems to me that how we listen and speak to our partners is one of the key tests of our Christlikeness, or lack of it. And when we're under pressure after a hard day and then forced to interact at home, the real person underneath has a tendency to show itself. In the home all pretence and external veneer is stripped away. It is there that we show our willingness to emulate our Lord in our consideration of others, our willingness to share burdens, our compassion and our love.

To compete, then, or to refuse to share trials or enter into the feelings of others, is essentially a denial of the value of Christ's example. It betrays a failure to understand the rest that Christ has brought to us in our tribulations. The words of the hymn capture it well: "I heard the voice of Jesus say, 'Come unto me and rest . . .' I came to Jesus as I was, Weary, and worn, and sad; I found in him a resting-place, And he has made me glad". The daily grind of life does by the end of the day bring a weariness, and sometimes its share of sadness and frustration as well. A partner who appreciates the rest and comfort that Christ has made possible in human life, and seeks to replicate that love and respite in their own behaviour, is a partner who has understood and absorbed the example of Christ.

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