

Two Is Not Enough

Charlie's Coffee Shop, early morning. The door swings open and three mothers in their early thirties fall in, resembling a military platoon after a day of heavy combat – and it's still only 9.08a.m!

Kate carries a baby strapped in a stroller, Helen a toddler glued to her skirt. Sarah has a lighter load, carrying a handbag where three small children once hung on.

'I know why they call it the school run', sighs Helen, sinking into a chair at the window table, where they are treated to views of passing traffic. Sarah nods, looking down at her T-shirt and realising it is inside out. 'Rush would be a better word'.

Kate is peering through the glass, watching a tall, well-dressed woman cross the road. 'There's Annabel! I thought she was joining us'.

'She was. Must have forgotten.' Sarah jumps up and goes to the door. 'Annabel!'

A few moments later, Annabel's head pokes round the coffee-shop door. Sarah notices how tired she looks, her face not nearly as composed as the outfit she wears.

'Oh, we did say coffee this morning, didn't we?' Annabel furrows her brow. 'Sorry, all of you, I'll have to give it a miss. I've got to be at work in an hour and you should see the house...'

Sarah smiles at her. 'Come on, Annabel, just a quick cup. You look like you need it'.

By the time coffee arrives, Annabel's story is coming out.

'We just don't have time for each other any more. Or maybe we don't want to. He's got his things – work, friends, going out – and I've got mine – the children. There's just no spark there, or rather the only sparks that are there are the flying sort, like when we were arguing last night'.

'You didn't throw the saucepan at him again, did you?' Helen asks.

'Frying pan', corrects Annabel. 'No, not this time. Oh, if only I could talk to my twenty-three-year-old self and say, "Watch out! The bubble will burst!"'

Kate, who is feeding baby Ella from a bottle, touches Annabel's shoulder with her free hand. 'You can't live like this, Annabel. Things don't stay the same for ever. Maybe it's just not right for the two of you any more'.

'Oh, no!' exclaims Sarah. Seeing the surprise on her friends' faces she adds: 'I mean, it doesn't have to be like that.'

‘It’s all right for you’, puts in Kate. ‘Sarah and Mark, Mr and Mrs Perfect’.
‘Yeah’, agrees Helen. ‘I’ve never heard of you two arguing – or throwing frying pans’.

For a moment, they all laugh, then look at Sarah expectantly. Sarah, however, is shaking her head.

‘Mark and I are far from perfect, you know’.

‘You see!’ says Helen, passing two-year-old Thomas a colouring book and crayons. ‘In five years’ time you might be talking like Annabel’.

‘No,’ Sarah replies, taking a sip of her cappuccino. ‘I’ll always be with Mark’. Annabel is incredulous. ‘Oh, open your eyes, Sarah! Life isn’t all romance! How can you be sure that even a relationship as strong as yours will last?’

Sarah puts her cup on the table. ‘Because Mark and I are both Christians’.

Annabel frowns. ‘OK, so you both go to church and believe the same things. That’s nice for you, but I can’t see how it’s a passport to lifelong happiness’.

‘Me neither,’ agrees Kate, putting a blanket over a now-sleeping Ella. ‘Dave and I share the same life-views, but I don’t know where we’ll be in twenty years’ time when this little one’s grown up and left home’.

Sarah takes a deep breath and looks at her friends. ‘It’s not what we believe but who we have. As Christians Mark and I each have a real and personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In marriage, that becomes like a triangle with Christ at the top. We don’t have to struggle along on our own’.

Helen looks half puzzled, half amused. ‘You’ve lost me. I thought marriage was meant for two!’

‘Believe me, Helen, two is not enough’. Sarah thinks for a moment. ‘Because of our relationship with Jesus, Mark and I have a special closeness to each other. It lets us look beyond the stresses – and frying pans – of everyday life. We know we’re going to the same place when we die, to be with Christ in heaven. And that’s the most important thing for anyone, married or not!’

Helen chokes on her coffee. ‘How on earth can you be so sure? No one knows what happens when you die’.

‘Exactly,’ agrees Annabel. ‘But I rather like to imagine a wonderful oblivion with no worries at all’.

‘You can imagine all you like,’ begins Sarah, ‘but it won’t change the fact that there’s only one true answer. It’s like when you go on holiday. Before you go, you build up a picture in your mind of what it will be like when you get there. When we go to a campsite I can

picture the whole layout in my head. Tent here; shower block there; path to children's playground here; swimming pool there, water warm and clean of course'.

Annabel smiles. 'Yes, and when you get there it's nothing like you imagined it would be'.

'Exactly. Maybe it's better, maybe worse. But the point is that the picture in your head was completely wrong. I always have to spend a couple of days adjusting my imaginary picture to the real one'.

Sarah looks round at her friends, who are nodding. 'Well, when we die, our own imaginings will be useless because we'll find out that there has really only been one truth all along – that there is a God who will judge us. And that's something we need to know now rather than then'.

Annabel's face is serious. 'If – just if – what you say is true, then what are we supposed to do about it? I can't suddenly start going to church and be a better person so I can pass the judgement and go to heaven when I die. It just wouldn't be me'.

Ella whimpers and wakes up. Kate lifts her out of the stroller and takes her on to her lap. 'Yeah, it's fine for you, Sarah. It's your "thing". I'm sure you were always like that – never doing anything wrong while the rest of us went around mucking up'.

Sarah laughs. 'You lot wouldn't recognise me at seventeen. I had more boyfriends than the rest of the class put together. And I made some bad mistakes'.

Annabel lets out a shriek, which startles the passing waitress. 'Sorry, Sarah, but that's not you'.

'It is', Sarah nods. 'Or rather it was'.

'So what – you decided to change your ways, clean up your image and go to church, right?' says Helen, reaching under the table for a stray crayon.

'No. I would never have chosen to do that! If we're not Christians, we don't want to change; we're happy being far from God. No, God led me to seek him in spite of myself – through people I met.

'When I did eventually start to read the Bible and go to church, I learnt that I was a rebellious sinner through and through, unable to do any good in God's sight and deserving only his judgement. But I also found out that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, died on the cross to take the punishment for my sins – and those of all who believe in him. I did believe and that's when I was converted. I found forgiveness in Christ and had an entirely new life in him. Mark was converted in the same way, about a year before I met him. That's what our marriage is based on – the living experience we share of Jesus. But you don't just need it for marriage, you need it for yourself'.

Sarah is suddenly aware of her friends looking at her. Kate averts her gaze and starts to fiddle with the salt. Helen picks up Thomas and exclaims brightly, 'You need a nappy change, young man!'

Annabel looks at Sarah, pensive. 'I've never heard anything like this before'.

Sarah smiles. 'Neither had I'.

Samantha Jellett, December 2004