

*The text of a homily preached at All Saints', East St. Kilda on the Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity (8.10..2006)*

In today's Gospel we are reminded of Jesus' teaching on marriage. To many people today this teaching seems unnecessarily strict and out of touch with the modern reality of frequent marriage breakdown. Today's readings can cause pain and disappointment to the divorced. Consequently, many clergy avoid preaching on today's subject, and opt for the less ominous second part of the Gospel for their subject matter. [One retired priest I know of now realises why it was that he always seemed to get invitations to preach on this particular Sunday, once every three years!]

The Church has quite a lot to say on marriage, and this is right and fitting because marriage is one of the most important foundation stones on which society is built. It is a divinely instituted sacrament. As such, it is a 'sign' of something far deeper than the love between two human beings. It is a sign of the love between God and man.

Many Christian denominations have accommodated themselves to the reality of widespread marriage breakdown and their clergy freely conduct second or third marriages. These same Churches are often the very ones that stress the importance of the literal word of God. Nevertheless the words of Jesus on the subject of marriage *are* startlingly clear. In the words of the Book of Common Prayer: *Those whom God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.*

Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce is found not just here in St. Mark's Gospel. One can also discover it in St. Luke and twice in St. Matthew. St. Paul clearly underlines Christ's teaching in his epistles. Today against the background of rising divorce statistics and the belief among many that marriage is only a human, social construction to be defined anyway we please, the teaching of Jesus about marriage sounds like an impossible dream.

We need, however, to look at the text of today's Gospel very carefully to get its full and proper meaning.

It's important to understand that what Jesus says is in response to yet another trick question put to him by the Pharisees: "Is it against the law for a man to divorce his wife?" They were, as St. Mark explains, 'testing him'.

Divorce was permitted in Jesus' day, following the guidelines of Moses set out in the book of Deuteronomy. A man could divorce his wife if he found her unfaithful or unsatisfactory. He could divorce his wife for the simplest reasons, such as not keeping the house in good order or even for being a hopeless cook! Notice the emphasis. *Men* were allowed to divorce their wives. Wives were not able to divorce their husbands.

Jesus denies the man's right and by so doing, *places the man and woman on an equal basis in the marriage*. The man must also stay and make the marriage work despite the difficulties.

Jesus opposed the approach to marriage - taken for granted at that time and indeed, still prevalent even today in some parts of the world. The woman was first the property of her father and then of her husband. If she committed adultery she violated the rights of her husband. It was only the woman who was at fault.

Jesus is claiming that the woman has rights in the relationship as well. By doing this he is not making the demands of marriage any easier, *but he is placing the marriage partners on an equal footing*. In fact, this changes the whole nature of marriage. It takes away the stress on family alliances, property rights and power, and puts the emphasis on mutual love and the union between a man and a woman.

When Jesus upheld the permanence of marriage he was going against the tide of opinion in his time. Then, as now, his teaching wasn't popular.

Even St. Mark points out that privately “the disciples questioned Jesus again about this.” To them, too, it seemed a hard teaching. However, Jesus does not claim to be introducing something new. He says he is going back to the original intention of God. As he says: “*From the beginning of creation God made them male and female...*”

Jesus is quoting from the book of Genesis, from which today’s first reading comes. He then draws the conclusion from this that in marriage, a man and woman “*are no longer two, therefore, but one body*”. His is a vision of a man and a woman joined in the intimate love of marriage and becoming so united as to be one. The sexual act is the physical sign of this union. Christian marriage mirrors the relationship between God and his people. It is unconditional and total.

In his answer to the Pharisees, then, Jesus does not question the validity of the Law of Moses. Instead, he recalls God’s original plan for marriage: that man and woman be united in an indissoluble bond. For Jesus, what God intended from the beginning is the norm for every marriage. In restoring marriage to a life-long commitment, Jesus also protects the woman from being treated as a disposable possession of her husband.

In a world where marriage was taken lightly because divorce was so easily obtainable, Jesus sought to rediscover the original plan of God. It is a call to return to the origin of marriage, an invitation to man and woman to see their commitment to one another in the light of God’s revelation. This is not punishing people with idealism. It is a summons to live in loyalty to God’s original call.

Thus Catholic Christians have a high ideal of marriage. Sometimes our marriage discipline and regulations cause people difficulties especially when they wish to remarry. [The most stressful and agonising pastoral problems encountered by the clergy, let me tell you, are often those involving these very matters.]

The Church finds herself in the difficult position of remaining true to the words of scripture and the clear teaching of Jesus, and at the same time making allowances for human failure and inadequacy. She does so, realising that Jesus’ teaching doesn’t specifically take into account *every* situation nor deal with *all* the complex issues that people face in their moral choices. These often occur in an environment and within a perception of marriage itself quite outside the sphere of either Judaism or the early Church.

Experience tells us that sometimes relationships go terribly wrong. In one writer’s words, we have all witnessed too often in marriage “... hopes not fulfilled, prayers not heard, efforts in vain, promises unrealised, frustration, disaster, a curse instead of a blessing, death instead of life.” The Church tries to show a particular concern and sympathy for those whose marriages have broken down, and recognises that they have a particularly difficult path of suffering to walk. She must speak the truth in love, yet she must also know when to exercise her power of ‘binding and loosing’ when appropriate.

However, the clear teaching of Jesus remains the norm, and the Church has no option but to submit to that teaching. Like her divine Master, the Church upholds the truth against the popular judgment of the times and the more radical elements even within her own ranks.

Jesus’ teaching in today’s Gospel, above all things, reminds us powerfully of the ultimate standard of *all* human relationships, of which marriage is the highest example. And that is, that life is all about relationships and concern for others. “*It is not good for man to be alone*”. No man is an island.

Life is only truly God-centred, only makes sense, and only ultimately becomes worthwhile, when we look to *others* for a purpose beyond our own private and personal needs, in a spirit of sacrifice

and self-giving .

Our understanding of 'love' must be grounded in this criterion. It cannot be fashioned by the temporary, shallow and often sentimental standards of a self focussed society in which the purpose of life is simply to have a 'good time', marriage is a convenient legal arrangement and sex is regarded primarily as a recreational activity.

We need look no further than the scriptures for our model: ***God is love, and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them.***

+ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Scripture Readings: Genesis 2, verses 18-24.*

*Mark 10. 2-12.*

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