



Twenty seventh Sunday Ordinary Time 2006

Genesis 2:18-24 Hebrews 2: 9-11 Mark 10: 2-16

The segment from Mark's Gospel on divorce seems out of place in the flow of the narrative. It begs the question of why Pharisees would want to interrogate Jesus on this issue. The question as posed was, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

The answer is clear. According to Mosaic Law, divorce was legal. Jesus puts the question back to the enquirers. It might be helpful to look at the text from Deuteronomy.

"When a man, after marrying a woman and having relations with her, is later displeased with her because he finds in her something indecent, and therefore he writes out a bill of divorce and hands it to her thus dismissing her from his house.

If on leaving his house she goes and becomes the wife of another man, and the second husband, too, comes to dislike her and dismisses her from his house by handing her a written bill of divorce; then if the second man who has married her dies; her former husband who has divorced her once may not again take her as his wife"

This as you can see was a case study provided to explain an extension of the law. What is not questioned is the right to divorce. While divorce was permitted it was required that the man give the woman a writ to safeguard her interests.

With the writ the woman could prove that she was divorced and so remarry.

This is why Joseph, in Matthew's Gospel, was free to divorce Mary if he so chose.

All of this is to explain why scholars read this story as a problem which emerged in the early Christian community.

How then did the Christian community come to recognise that easy divorce was not in accordance with the original plan of God? Mark tells us that Jesus cited Genesis to provide the basis of a new understanding of human community. This is an important point as it is an example of one of the many times Jesus showed both his disciples and his critics that it was dangerous to build a case based on one passage from Scripture. By referring to Genesis he pointed them gently in a new direction.

If marriage is the formation of "one body", then the body created by God, cannot be destroyed by humans. As Jesus preached the coming of the kingdom as a new way of being before God therefore disciples would strive to carry out the dream of God in its fullest expression.

What we have here is the grey area between ideal and real. We also have to consider the belief that the time between the coming of Jesus and the fulfilment would be short.

Today Christians have to wrestle with these questions. In the area of marriage how do we balance the ideal with life experience?

Is marriage a sacrament or a civil contract?

How we answer that question will determine our attitudes.

The Catholic Church teaches that marriage is a permanent union between a man and a woman but over the centuries the Church's own pastoral practice has permitted certain conditions, which may allow the marriage to be dissolved.

In 1 Cor. 7: 10-16, Paul describes the case of a mixed faith marriage. He says, although I know of nothing the Lord has said, I say: If any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever but is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. (it applies to women also)

"If the *unbeliever* wishes to separate, however, let him do so. The believing husband or wife is not bound in such cases. God has called you to live in peace."

Today Canon Law allows annulment for certain reasons but does not allow divorce.

Other Christian denominations have different laws. Space does not permit a fuller expansion on this subject.

The origins of the sacramental nature of marriage lie in the imagery of Scripture where the marriage union was used as a symbol of the unity between God and humanity.

The church believes that, the union of man and woman, a relationship committed to total sharing with each other, which seeks to promote each other's growth in holiness and that of their children, shows the presence of the kingdom among us.

The passage from Hebrews presents a lovely birthing image-

If Jesus gives birth to many children, suffering is part of the process. So suffering is our lot if we work to bring about the healing of the world.

This is to be balanced with the reminder, God has called you to live in peace!

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