

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mark 10:2-16

Some Pharisees came to Jesus, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery too."

REFLECTION 1: RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS

Pope Benedict once described marriage as 'an asset for the spouses, for the children, for the Church, and for all humankind'. In today's Gospel, Jesus says, 'What God has joined together, let no one separate'. But despite many wonderful and enduring marriages, for many complex reasons, strong stable marriages seem to be in trouble in today's society. The changing concept of family, as reflected in television and movies, seems to be 'anything goes'. So the aim of this homily is to ask how can we affirm this treasure today?

So, let's start off with the short story by Patricia McGerr entitled 'The Eight Cow Wife'. It gives us an excellent example of the value of respect among married couples. In the days when dowries were expected, Johnny Lingo, an entrepreneur on the Pacific Island of Kaniwata, offered eight cows to the father of Sarita, whom he wished to marry. Sarita was plain and too thin; she walked with her shoulders hunched and her head down. She had no self-esteem whatsoever. Usually a dowry consisted of three cows or five at the most; eight was unheard of. Nevertheless, that's what Johnny Lingo gave. Months later a visitor to the island of Nurabandi, where Johnny now lived, came over to avail himself of Johnny's business skills. He had heard of the eight-cow dowry and the plainness of Sarita. But when he met her he found her to be the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. There was a sparkle in her eyes. The fact that her husband loved and respected her enough to offer an extravagant dowry for her made all the difference. Because of him she had become her best and most beautiful self. Such is the dynamic of marriage; two persons who love one another more than themselves call for the best in each other. Together they bear witness to the world that true love and respect are possible.

According to the authors of Genesis, (Gen. 2: 18-24) the love between married people was ordained and blessed by God, who intended that the two become one so as to be helpmates and partners in all they are. Together, married people are to be stewards of all that God has made, and together they are to participate in the creative power of God by bringing forth new lives, which are to be cherished as God's precious gifts.

However for various reasons, the ideal is not always realised. Some marriages don't last for life. So when approached with this reality, Jesus in today's Gospel did not enter into debate about the lawfulness of divorce. Rather he focused on marriage as a divinely ordained union, as did the Genesis authors. Jesus was living in a society in which women rarely, if ever, owned property and had no independent means of making a living. For that reason, marriage was a lifesaver. Marriage guaranteed support for the most vulnerable members of society, women and children. For their protection, marriage had to be stable and enduring. Laws forbidding divorce indicated that women and children should not be left on their own. In criticising those who advocated divorce, especially for frivolous reasons, Jesus was taking up the cause of the poor and the weak and coming down squarely on the side of the

defenceless. 'Don't do that to women!' is Jesus' stern message. With this background, we can understand his words not as condemnation, but as an expression of compassion.

Although the social context of Jesus' day no longer exists, his message of compassion and his desire to protect the weak and defenceless continues to apply. Whether married or divorced, whether gay or straight, all people are cherished creations of God. Whether or not each is able to sustain a lasting relationship with another, is not a reason to judge or condemn them. On the contrary, like Jesus, we are to be compassionate and caring, trusting in the good consciences of others and respectful of the difficult decisions they have to make. To exclude those who are most in need of the support of the faith community would not only be unkind; it would be contrary to the example set by Jesus and the Gospel he came to proclaim.

REFLECTION 2: FAMILY CHALLENGES

Karam Chand lived to his 109th year and his wife Kartari to 102 years. They hold the title to the longest marriage in the world. They were married in 1925 and lived in Bradford, England. They were an affirmation that in marriage, the two became one flesh. Today in the Gospel (Mk. 10: 2-16) Jesus reminds the Pharisees, 'What God has joined together, no human may separate'. God blessed the Chands with love, many years and eight children. Or, take Luigi Quatracinni and Maria Corsini, who raised four children. Both were beatified by St. John Paul II on October 21st 2001. Their feast day is their wedding date. Wouldn't it be nice if all marriages worked out so well?

It is good to think that the church has come to recognise marriage and family life as a 'state of holiness' for a couple. Yet, as we all know, marriage and family life can be difficult and always has been. Even thousands of years ago, Moses addressed marriage breakup by permitting divorce. The 2015 Synod on the Family was an effort on the part of the Catholic Church to explore the current experience of marriage and family and to offer some help. There is a need for the church to do a better job of supporting couples and families. Pope Francis asked dioceses throughout the world to listen to the people and to submit concerns and suggestions. As we hear the readings today there are basic ideals for marriage and up-front is the need for companionship; 'It is not good for man/woman to be alone'. Genesis tells us that God provides a companion, one who is equal to the man. In return the man leaves behind his birth family and becomes faithful to his wife. However faithfulness has not always endured and this is the place where the Pharisees attempt to best Jesus, 'Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife' and Jesus responds 'What God has joined together no one must divide'. That is the ideal, but there are certain human factors that make it not only difficult for the spouses to stay together, but necessary for some to separate. Pope Francis has spoken about times when people must separate as he put it 'to remove a spouse or young children from wounds caused by violence and exploitation'. External pressures on society, culture and the economy all take their toll on family life – such as homelessness, lack of food and safe drinking water, unemployment, rising rents – also health issues, physical and mental.

The church at the 2015 synod wanted to be of service to families as they struggle with their realities – the issues were many and solutions not clear. Like for instance being able to offer the sacraments to divorced and remarried Catholics who do not have annulments. Also how to deal with couples living together without the grace of marriage, to be welcoming to same sex couples, families of mixed religion, all these presented significant challenges to the synod participants.

The ideal of lifelong marriages and stable family life are held up for us in the readings today and are still valid. But we humans, who struggle to reach these ideals are limited and frail and must rely on God's understanding and mercy. We also need to offer each other support – we are all in this together.

May St. Brigid of Sweden, mother of eight and patroness of Europe, and St. Thomas Moore, martyr and married man intercede for all couples and families, especially those who have greater challenges and the least resources. Amen.