

Sunday 27.09

Someone suggested that today's readings would make a preacher want to call in sick. Somehow or other, I don't think that happens in the Catholic Church unless the preacher is really, really sick. But the meaning of the suggestion is clear. These are difficult readings not only in themselves but especially because many good people who have struggled with their marriages can so easily be disheartened by them. But here we are. The preacher is not sick but here and must attempt to say something about them.

First of all, the theme of today's readings is marriage. As is normal for our Sunday readings, the first reading and the Gospel share a common theme while the second reading has its own theme.

Today's first reading from the second chapter of Genesis is in itself not problematic. It is simply beautiful. God is here described as discovering that his creation, man, needs a partner because "it is not good for him to be alone." But no suitable partner among all the other creations of God is to be found. Therefore God puts the man to sleep and fashions woman out of his own body. What does that mean? It means that the woman is man's equal: bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. And that in turn explains the human phenomenon of a young man leaving his parents to find his

partner, his woman. In the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy's novel Anna Karenina one of the characters, Levin by name, experiences his wife's anger for the first time and is about to respond in kind, but then he realizes that he cannot do so and explains why he cannot do so with this example. A man feels a blow from behind and turns around to respond in kind but then finds that he has hit himself, say on the edge of a table he was passing. Levin feels that this is how it is with his wife. To quarrel with her would be like hitting himself because he can no longer clearly distinguish where he leaves off and she begins. His wife is, in the words of Genesis, bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. That is the ideal. And sometimes we meet it. I am always amazed when I ask a husband to do something and he says to me: Wait a minute. Let me check with my wife. Or often the phrase is: Let me check with the boss.

But when we get to today's Gospel, the waters are not so clam and clear. First of all, the Pharisees' question about whether or not divorce is allowed is probably not a totally honest question. Yes, they may want an answer to that question, but they are hoping to embarrass Jesus in some way either by forcing him to disagree with the present practice among his contemporary Jews which allowed for divorce, which would make him unpopular with his contemporaries, or to agree with it and thereby place himself in a

contradiction with the more ancient tradition which did not allow for divorce. Jesus, as usual, outsmarts them. Yes, he says, divorce is now allowed and originated with Moses himself, but this was a falling away from the original understanding of marriage given in Genesis. And the reason why Moses allowed for this falling way from the original ideal was the hardness of his contemporaries' hearts. Having said that, Jesus now calls for a return to the original ideal.

Our church has tried to remain faithful to the Lord's return to this ideal. It does not easily dismember a marriage. If and when it does so, it does so by declaring that something was lacking in the marriage from its very beginning which did not allow it to become a real marriage. Many people, Catholics included, do not buy this kind of argument, especially when there are children to prove that the couple seeking the divorce did indeed live together as husband and wife. And in the past the physical union which the children's existence represents was reason enough for the church to refuse to grant a divorce. But that is no longer the case. Psychological reasons are now recognized as possible reasons for granting a divorce.

Even in the earliest days of the church divorce was allowed under certain circumstances. In chapter 7 of his First Letter to the Corinthians Paul says that if a member of the community is married to a non-Christian and the non-Christian no longer wants to live with his or her Christian spouse, the Christian spouse may separate from the non-Christian spouse and is now free to enter into a new marriage. That is called the Pauline Privilege. In Matthew's Gospel in a passage which matches the one we have read from Mark as today's Gospel, Jesus allows for divorce in the case of unchastity. Scripture scholars argue about the meaning of the word unchastity in this case. But whatever its meaning, it is clear that the Lord allows for divorce for this reason.

Unlike other Christian churches, our church claims that marriage is a sacrament, and by that it means that the union of the husband and wife mirrors and reflects the union of Christ and his church. The Lord's union with his church is permanent and exclusive. Hence a Catholic marriage must reflect this permanency and exclusiveness. Hence the prejudice against divorce for those who marry in the Church.

Marriage is an endangered species today. People live together today without it and feel better about doing so because their

freedom is not impaired. They can leave when it is no longer fun to live together. Even those who want to commit themselves permanently to another find it very hard to do so because society does not support such a commitment. And so we must pray for the young today who are going to marry. May the Lord support them in their commitment to each other. And we give thanks for the successful marriages among us, the spouses who have weathered the storm, who are still together after twenty or thirty or forty or fifty or sixty years of marriage and still call their spouses by affectionate names like sweetie and mean it. We congratulate them and hope that their children and grandchildren will emulate them. And we offer our sympathy to those who have lost their spouses after many years together. May their sorrow be lessened by the many memories of their happy years together with their spouses.