

Proper 22B – “What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.” Mark 10.9

A man at work decided to show his wife how much he loved her, and before going home, showered, shaved, put on some choice cologne, bought her a bouquet of flowers. He went to the front door and knocked. His wife answered the door and exclaimed, "Oh no! This has been a terrible day! First I had to take Billy to the emergency room and get stitches in his leg, then your mother called and said she's coming for 2 weeks, then the washing machine broke, and now this! You come home drunk!"

And the women are not above suspicion in the matter of marriage. The speaker at a woman's club was lecturing on marriage and asked the audience how many of us wanted to "mother" our husbands. One member in the back row raised her hand. "You do want to mother your husband?" the speaker asked. "Mother?" the woman echoed. "I thought you said smother."

There is no question that marriage, its success and failure, is one of the central concerns in human life. It is strange to me to see that in this age of the decline of marriage, being cast off for a more

enlightened freedom, that celebrity dalliances continue to make the news. The David Letterman scandal this week and the ongoing John and Kate Gosselin saga are truly ironic in the sense that they occur in a land where traditional marriage seems to have passed its prime. Perhaps our cultural interest comes from plain old prurience or simple meddling. But it might be that, despite our protests otherwise, we secretly believe that marriage is the right way to go. Down deep inside, we know that there is a need for support and accompaniment that can only be provided by the state of matrimony. This need stands at the very center of our being. And that is why it is such a powerful feature in our lives and our culture.

We should not be surprised, then, to find that marriage, or more specifically its failure, was a point of controversy in Jesus' day. According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus had ended his ministry in Galilee, and was taking his disciples with him to Jerusalem. While he had been tested and criticized throughout his ministry, his critics' attacks were becoming more frequent and more antagonistic. So Mark records that the Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Jesus' opponents wanted to catch him up in his words to find some evidence against him. In such

a highly charged political age Jesus was in jeopardy from almost every corner. His popularity with the people gave him a broad base of support. But if he denied the Torah, the fundamental charter of Israel, the popular support could vanish. Likewise, if his answers seemed too political or destabilizing, he might fall foul of the Roman overlord and be dispatched as an enemy of the state. Jesus and the Pharisees were not having a safe, theoretical or theological discussion about pastoral issues. Jesus' opponents were using divorce as a diversion for their agenda.

But, as was so often the case, Jesus cuts straight to the heart of the issue. The Pharisees wanted to know about concessions or loopholes in the Law. Instead, Jesus reminded them of the commands of the Law. Remember how the Liturgy summarizes the Law in the words of Our Lord Jesus Christ when he said: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind. This is the first and greatest commandment and the second is like unto it: thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. The Pharisees wanted Jesus to engage in a debate over the case law of exceptions. Jesus wanted them to consider deeply what God's perfect will asked of them at every

stage in their lives. So let us consider briefly the divine institution of marriage and then the problem of divorce.

Jesus answered the Pharisees' question with a question. "Does the Law allow a man to divorce his wife", they had asked. Jesus responded, "What did Moses say?" They responded in the affirmative, citing the book of Deuteronomy, the law given before the Israelites entered into the Promised Land. But Jesus responded that they had not gone back far enough in their legal argument. Their whole question rested upon a later, and we might say, provisional legislation. What was God's original intent when he had made all things that existed? According to Creation mankind was made male and female in God's image. But they were not created to exist one alongside the other as two different and independent species. No, they were made for one another. God had created man first in time. He was given the care of the Garden and her inhabitants. But in all this perfection there was something that was not right. Adam was lonely. God had proclaimed all things good, but he said, "It is not good that the man should be alone." So Adam named the animals in the Garden but none of them were candidates as a helper that corresponded to him. We should notice this careful distinction.

Genesis does not say that none of the animals were a help to Adam. Adams' loneliness came from the fact that there was no helper that corresponded to him, that was like him. So the Lord made Eve from the side of Adam so she was called Woman, because she was made from Man. The goodness of marriage is that God in his mercy has given man and woman what they need the most, companionship, "one-flesh-ness". They are not simply to be partners in some venture, whether it be business or pleasure. They are to be bound together in mind, heart, and spirit. They have ceased to be two. They are now one. This was God's command from the beginning.

Of course, this sets the problem of divorce in stark relief. It was God's design from the beginning of his perfect creation that man and woman be joined together and in so doing make one flesh. If this was the origin of marriage, what is the origin of divorce? It must be the Fall into sin. Yes, it is true that the Fall had nothing to do with divorce per se, and was more concerned with eating the forbidden fruit. But that sin, contracted in the original act, has worked its way out into all that the Father had made so good. The relationship between man and wife was not exempt. Adam and Eve were called to obey the Father and not eat of the forbidden fruit. They did and were expelled from

the Garden. Adam and Eve were given to one another for companionship and the gift of children, but they sinned and their children fought and killed and broke the one flesh in pieces. So Jesus was right to say that Moses' exception was not so from the beginning. God the Father had commanded that his creatures love him with their whole heart and likewise love the ones who were made in his image. They would not, because they were hard hearted, and Moses made an exception because of their brokenness.

But it had been Jesus' proclamation that in him all things were being made new. In him and his ministry the Kingdom of God was breaking into the world that had been enslaved to sin and death for so long. In him the Devil and all his works were being thrown out, the strongman defeated and his house despoiled. In him the Creation was being restored. By invoking the Creation story Jesus was drawing his opponents' attention to the startling divide between the perfection of the Father's will and their squabbles over concessions. By invoking the Creation story Jesus meant for them to understand that the new Creation would restore the glory even to the marriage between man and wife.

I am well aware that this joyous condition does not reign even now and even here in the Church. Because of our hardness of heart, and unwillingness to live out the Gospel in our own lives the Church's witness in all things, but certainly the goodness and sanctity of marriage has been undermined. But Jesus is clear that divorce is not a right. Deuteronomy and the rabbis following this Law stated that a man could give a woman her walking papers if she did not please him. We have returned to this standard in our land today. But Jesus said that only adultery was cause for divorce. Christians should be living lives in the conviction that the new perfect world is breaking into this old and broken world. Divorce is neither a right nor an inevitable conclusion to an unhappy association. Instead, we should consider it for what it truly is: an acknowledgment of human brokenness. But dear friends, Jesus has promised that he is making all things new! He has promised that he is taking his bride, his broken and wayward bride, and he is perfecting her until that day when he shall present her before the Father spotless and blameless. If he shall do that for the Church, will he not also do that for us and our husbands and wives? Will he not make sure the mystery of marriage between each one of us, even as he is faithful to his bride the Church? O let us

devote ourselves in chastity, faithfulness and patience to our spouses and to our Lord Jesus that he may receive us into joy saying, “Well done, good and faithful servants.” AMEN.