

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

Every great religion has sacred stories which account for the beginning of creation and the human race. The book of Genesis has two stories of creation, the second of which we hear in today's first reading. God fashions "the man" of dust from the soil and then breathes into his nostrils a breath of life. God's breath is man's life. When God plants a garden in the midst of the wasteland, this garden becomes man's first address. He inhabits a beautiful place in Eden, but the wasteland still surrounds his domain.

But all is not well. The man is alone. So to relieve man's aloneness, God begins work at creating a helper. Then there is the striking and comical image of God creating all the beasts and the birds which he brings to man to see if he will name any of them "Helper". There is a long procession of candidates for the post: man gives names to them all, but none is named "Helper". After the interviews, man is still alone. Clearly, God has to think again.

So the Lord makes the Man fall into a deep sleep and then takes something from him. What is taken is enclosed in flesh to become a new creature, a Woman. The original Man makes for two creatures: an individual man and an individual woman. When God brings the woman to the man, this time there is success as the man exclaims, "At last..." Man and Woman – helpmates one to another !! The writer adds: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and joins himself to his wife..." Only marriage captures the original completion of the total human person. Perhaps that is the simplest and best description of a good marriage..... "helpmates" to one another.

That original vision of unity and completion is what Jesus calls on in today's Gospel. Some Pharisees ask Jesus if it is against the Law for a man to divorce his wife. When Jesus asks what Moses commanded, they reply that Moses permitted it. The Law stipulated that whenever divorce was granted to the male partner the woman's interest must be safeguarded by giving her a writ of dismissal, which freed her to marry again (Deut 24:1-4). What the Law did not settle was in what circumstances divorce was legal, thus freeing the woman to marry again.

Divorce was *man's* prerogative. A woman could sue, asking the court to compel her husband to divorce her; but it was he who divorced her. But there was little agreement about the grounds for divorce. The strict school of Shammai interpreted the only ground to be adultery; the more lax school of Hillel allowed a man to divorce his wife for trivial causes – if she displeased him . “Even if she spoiled a dish for him” was one of the given examples. (*Yeh, I know what some of you blokes are thinking !!*)

The Pharisees test Jesus to see which school of thinkers he will follow. Not surprisingly, divorce was common in the time of Jesus, and marriage offered little security for a woman who could be dismissed at her husband's whim. Jesus seeks to change all that. Jesus returns to the original teaching of Genesis which protects woman against the whims of the man, and teaches the unity and permanence of marriage. This is not to punish people with idealism, but to invite them to live in loyalty to God's original call.

In his answer to the Pharisees Jesus does not question the validity of the Law of Moses, but claims that it was a concession to human sinfulness. He recalls God's original plan for marriage, revealed in Genesis: that man and woman be united in an indissoluble bond. For Jesus, what God intended from the beginning is the norm for every marriage. And in attempting to restore marriage to a serious life-long commitment, Jesus' argument also protects the woman from being treated as a disposable possession of her husband.

I hope that as Church we never lose sight of that vision, of God's original call – and that we proclaim that vision with enthusiasm. Many couples struggle to maintain their marriage for a variety of reasons that include pressures of work, difficulties in relationship, distance and communication problems. The Church is called to be a place of welcome and support for their needs. It is too easy simply to have pre-marriage preparation classes and then hope for the best. *In what ways can the Church be supportive of marriage and family in this parish?* Can I just repeat that question because it is important. *In what ways can the Church be supportive of marriage and family in this Parish ?* That is a question for our Leadership and indeed every one of us to consider.

But experience teaches us that things do go terribly wrong. People do make mistakes. Infidelities do happen. Spouses do become victims and oppressors. Endless silences do happen. Marriages do collapse. There are legions of

casualties to prove this, the walking wounded of broken marriages. Some people who have been divorced may feel hurt, pain or anger, as they reflect on the disappointment that they experience about their marriage. The healing process may be long and slow. Others may feel excluded by the Church because of decisions they made to remarry in a civil ceremony in order to help children, or because of the loneliness they experienced, or when they discovered real love. These people, too, must know that they are welcome here, that their needs will be addressed as well. In this place **all** are welcome. I really do hope that anyone who is concerned about his or her marriage situation would feel free to talk about it with me. Very often there is a way!

But, in the meantime, what we do know is that the infinite mystery of God's compassionate love provides hope to all in need.