

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

(Genesis 2:18-24 / Mark 10:2-16)

04.10.2015

In today's gospel we read the words: *what God has united man must not separate.*

What God has united.

Let us just back-track a little and look at the Creation stories which we read in the first book of the Bible, the Book of Genesis.

I suggest that we look to these stories, not in order to take them literally, but because they want to say profound things to us about our identity as human beings and our relationships with each other. These stories speak to us not least about that privileged relationship which stands at the very heart of our constitution as human persons: the relationship between the sexes, male and female, and, among all our male-female relationships, that privileged relationship lived by many as husband and wife.

I think the first thing we should remember when we read the words *what God has united* is that *in the beginning* what is now called to be united was first made separate.

The distinct sexes came into being by being separated one from the other.

The word *sexed* suggests this. Literally, it means *cut off from*. (Think of the word *section* which is a separate part of something.)

At the very beginning, at our inception, our being created, we were separated one sex from the other.

The creation story makes this point when it speaks of *woman* being *formed from the rib taken from* (separated from) *the man*.

This is the Bible's way of talking about/explaining the longing for union/communion which exists between male and female. The longing of the sexes for union is seen to stem from and be explained by their initial separation from each other. This initial separation is seen to leave each sex with, what we might call, a *nostalgia* for the other, a longing to be reunited with the other. It explains that sense we hold in our hearts of each one being somehow incomplete without union with the other. Each sex realises that there is something missing in itself which is found in the opposite sex. Each sex has a need for some sort of connection with the other in order to be complete.

Fundamentally, the desire felt by attraction to persons of the opposite sex is a desire for union/communion.

There is within every human person a desire for union/communion, over and above just genital sexual connection, but not excluding this form of union, of course.

But, I would want to emphasise that the union/communion, for which we all long, can be experienced without genital connection: the union and complementarity between male and female does not depend upon their coming together in sexual intercourse.

The reality is that not everybody marries: not everybody lives that privileged form of relationship which is the relationship between a husband and a wife.

But, let us be clear, none of us is ever a self-sufficient being.

We all need others. We all need to be in relationship with other people.

There is something lacking in each one of our lives which can only be completed in some way through relationships with others.

Our need for union with others expresses something about our need for union with God, for while

each one of us is *made in God's image and likeness*, so too is every other person.

In regard to the relationship of each one of us with the opposite sex, the Bible has something very important to say to us when it states that *God made humanity in the image of Himself* when *He created humanity male and female*.

This further underlines what I have been saying about neither sex being complete in itself. Male and female are incomplete in their own sex alone. Male and female, we complete each other.

The difference between the sexes is to be respected, for if we fail to respect it we do an injustice to God in whose image and likeness we are made ... with our differences!

Furthermore, it is not only to God to whom we do injustice, we also deprive ourselves of that part of our being which is missing to us when we stand alone.

The great union for which we are made is ultimately union with God, of course. In many ways the union between man and woman is a parable of this communion.

The Bible often speaks of the relationship between God and His people, between the divinity and humanity, in terms of marriage. Just think of the prophet Hosea, for example, or again of Paul's vision of the Church in the epistle to the Ephesians.

Having come from God we long to be reunited with Him, Since *God is love*, all longing for love in our lives (and there should be a longing for love in all our lives!) is a longing for God

This is true, whether or not we fully recognise it to be so.

Admittedly, it happens so often that we fail to recognise our longing for love for what it is ultimately: a longing for God!

The deep yearning for love which is there in each one of us – our yearning to love and to be loved – is due to our having been *made in God's image and likeness*.

The longing for love (to love and to be loved) is there in each one of us in the deepest ground of our being. It is a hope and aspiration we all carry within us.

Without love (and, given our belief that *God is love*, I would dare to say, without God) we are incomplete.

Our wholeness is found in relationship with God, a relationship which for most people is expressed in and through that privileged relationship with another which is marriage.

For those of us who are not married, we live this privileged relationship with God in and through so many other forms of human relationships.

In any case, no one can or should stand completely apart from others. We were all made to relate to others in some way. We all need community. Community implies being *in union* with others, in *com-unity* with them.

I have emphasised that the truest meaning of our life is found in love, but, let us understand what we are saying when we say that we long for love.

You see there is a world of difference between *loving love* – by that I mean loving the idea of being *in love*, as we say – and really loving another person.

St Augustine makes a very clear-cut distinction between *loving love* and *loving* – that is, *loving another*.

He sees *loving love* as being all about loving oneself through the other, using the other to feel good about oneself and in oneself.

For him, simply *loving* is something different. It is loving the other for the other's sake.

There is a world of difference between the two!

For Augustine only the latter type of love truly deserves the name love, for it leads us out of our self, beyond that obsessional tendency which can so easily mar our lives: the tendency towards obsessional self-interest, selfishness, self-centredness.

You might ask why I am stressing all that I have emphasised so far.

Some might even think I am complicating things tremendously with the considerations proffered here.

While I hope I am not complicating things, the reason I am sharing all these preliminary thoughts before saying anything on what some might see as the burning issue in today's gospel passage – namely, the question of divorce - is to draw us away from a far too simplistic reading of today's gospel text.

There are those who use today's gospel text in a very lapidary way. They use it to cut people to shreds.

They reiterate Jesus' words here to others as if they were throwing stones at people rather than encouraging them.

They will say such things as *divorce is wrong* (every divorce, any divorce) *and that is all there is to it.*

Often, people will make this kind of statement without ever having considered what relationships are really all about: without ever having considered what relating to another person, other people, is all about. They will uphold Church teaching (or so they think) without actually having thought through how all our relationships should be lived in God.

Yes, *in God!*

There are some who would see themselves as strong advocates of marriage and *love for life* who have never really grasped what the mystery of Christian marriage, and indeed any sort of true relationship between the sexes, and with others of their own sex, is all about.

There are those who will defend fidelity in marriage who do not know the meaning of fidelity at all. (The root of *fidelity* is *faith*.) They will ignore the importance of living in truly strong faith-animated, faith-filled relationships. They will be oblivious to what a faithful relationship (a *faith*-full relationship - a relationship lived *in God*) is really like.

There are many loveless marriages (blessed in Churches) which have held together for reasons less than the true Christian ideal.

It isn't enough to say to people (as many will have done in the past, believing they were upholding Christian values): *You have made your bed, now lie in it.*

Such lapidary statements only make of marriages *life-sentences*.

Such harsh statements do not actually make a marriage what it should be: a life-long love relationship; a lasting life-giving, life-enhancing, commitment, which is nothing less than a sacrament of God's love.

I find it striking that sometimes the only things Christians have to say about marriage sound like *life-sentence* judgements passed upon themselves and others and their way of speaking of marriages (be they marriages which are struggling to hold together or those which have failed) are pronouncements devoid of God's mercy and compassion.

In contrast, often the way non-Christians speak of love relationships leads them to have recourse to quasi-religious language.

It is as if, at times, non-Christians get the Christian ideal better than Christians do themselves!

It has been remarked that even in a culture so secular as modern Western culture, the language of

love, in literature, in poetry and in popular song, is still the language of worship, adoration, divinity, ecstasy, everlastingness, eternity.

Couples who share love – even without any faith dimension to their relationship – readily use expressions containing these and other similar words to speak of what they are experiencing. And, yet, at the same time, sometimes all the Church seems to proffer in its discourse about love relationships and marriage are sets of rules and regulations, laws to be adhered to, norms to be observed.

This is sad.

If only in the Church we had a more positive way of speaking of Christian marriage and, indeed, all authentic love relationships shared!

If only the Church was to present the greatest light on human love that history has ever known: the revelation of God's love in Christ-Jesus!

Christ-Jesus calls upon us to love as God loves: in a self-giving way.

This the call the Church should be echoing.

If only the Church was to draw more attention to the fact that the Bible is through and through the story of God's unending love for men and women: His love for our broken, fallen, wounded humanity in its longing for love!

The Churches have done so much harm by concentrating so much on sexual *sins*, which, truth be told, are quite often much more signs of human weakness than decidedly, wilfully indulged in, sinful behaviours.

In much Church teaching the whole emphasis has been put upon what people do with their bodies, while forgetting what Jesus emphasises over and above all else: the attitude of people's hearts.

The call of the gospel is always a call to love: *love which endures forever*.

If all we are advocating are laws (laws with a small l), rules and regulations, rather than *the Law* (with a capital L – God's Torah, His teaching, the way of life God proposes to His people), then we are actually under-estimating the true value of marriage and every relationship of human love.

What God has united.

What we should be emphasising is **God's place** in all our unions/communions!

If we were to give God, who is love in Himself, all the place He should be given in our own hearts and in all the *heart to heart* love relationships of our lives, we would benefit accordingly. We would be greatly helped to live in that faithfulness in love which God is in Himself.

I find it encouraging that today's gospel passage should end on such a positive note. Its last word is *blessing*.

The vision of Christ that we are shown here corresponds to the vision of God we find in the Book of Genesis.

Just as *God blessed the man and woman whom He created* and rejoiced in them and in their union/communion, so *Jesus blessed the little children* who were brought to Him.

The message I would like all of us to take away from this morning's celebration – or rather which I am sure the Lord would like to see us take away from this celebration – is one of **blessing**.

We are blessed by God in our relationships and called to be for each other a blessing in them.

At times we have failed in this respect.

I am sure we will all fail time and time again, but each time, let us dare to believe that the Lord is there to pick us up and bless us in such a way that we are strengthened to set out afresh on the path of life and love upon which He calls us to follow Him, each one according to our own particular vocation.

Amen!