

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)  
(Genesis 2:18-24 / Mark 10:2-12)  
03.10.2021

*The Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helpmate'.* According to the story the animals were made at this stage, but these were deemed insufficient company for man. The text goes on: *So, while he slept, the Lord took one of man's ribs and enclosed it in flesh. The Lord built the rib He had taken from the man into a woman and brought her to the man. The man exclaimed: 'This is at last bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh!' This is to be called woman for this was taken from man.* The importance of the relationship between man and woman is underlined with this underscoring statement: *This is why a man leaves his father and mother and joins himself to his wife, and they become one body.* I believe it was important for us to listen to those lines from our first reading once again before offering a few comments on them.

I suspect what is shared with us here in this colourful account of the creation of woman – and, we could say, this ‘explanation’ of the relationship between man and woman – will have sounded to our ears somewhat far-fetched. To modern thought this presentation comes across as altogether naive... so much so that we are inclined to dismiss it for ourselves and may even feel embarrassed about sharing it with others beyond our faith tradition. Most of us will have heard comedians *make hay* with this story and others like it from the Book of Genesis. This can lead us to want to pass it over quietly, for fear of awakening even more ridicule. That being said, we would be foolish to dismiss the text read this morning and other ancient texts like it. To do so would be a monumental error on our behalf. For, the reality is that this story contains some really important insights which should retain our attention. Great truths are conveyed to us here. The very simple *word picture* employed concerning the creation of woman in what we could consider to be this *wisdom story* deserves to be unpacked with attention. For this reason we will consider this text seriously, reading it meditatively, in a way that permits us to go deeper than a simple surface reading would.

A surface reading of this Genesis text might lead some to think of woman as just *an after-thought...* a creature of lesser value than man since she was *just made out of a spare rib*, to speak somewhat flippantly. Such a vision of woman is certainly not what an intelligent reading of the text would have us grasp about the female sex. The text is very clear that only when woman is created does man find *a helpmate suitable for himself. A helpmate!* That is an interesting way of putting things. The author makes a very important point here. What is implied by the word *helpmate* is that woman is an equal partner to man. Woman is not subservient to man. There is a big difference between *a helpmate suitable to man* and a servant to tend to his needs. *A helpmate* is not simply a *helper* – in the way we might talk to children about *Santa's little helpers*. A *helpmate* is someone of equal standing who not only offers the other support, but who is complementary to the other in the sense of completing the other. What woman is in relation to man is a supportive equal partner who completes man! In the story the man's reaction when he sees the woman is particularly striking. He breaks into an exclamation of wonder. It is as if he intones a love song in which he marvels in the partner given to him: *This is at last bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh.* The man sees the woman and recognises in her something of himself, we could say, but, if he sees something of himself in her, he also sees something more than himself in her. Contemplating woman man marvels at the splendour he beholds. Man is fascinated by woman's difference to him as much as – and more than – her likeness to him. We can take it that there was reciprocity between the two. Both man and woman would have recognised – should still recognise – in the other not just *something* but *someone* wonderful. Man and woman are called to rejoice each one in the other; to rejoice in what unites them and what differentiates them! The point

to be grasped is that both man and woman find fulfilment in each other. They are both called to wonder in and marvel at the gift they are to each other. From now on Adam (to be understood in the literal sense, *the human being/human beings male and female*) – is not alone, but given to each other, to be one with each other. The Bible makes the point, not only here, but in many other places, that it is precisely together with another/with others that each person is made to live his or her life. *No man/no woman is an island!*

Yet another remark worth making is that it is together, in their union with each other, that men and women are made in the image and likeness of God. Elsewhere in the Genesis story we read: *God created man in the image of Himself, in the image of God He created him, male and female he created them*. It is in their difference as male and female (in their difference brought together, lived in communion) that humans are in the likeness of God. It is in their completing each other that men and women reflect who and what God is. We might ask: *who and what is God?* The answer to that question is that *God is relationship in Himself; God is in Himself relationship in love*. This is what the mystery of the Trinity reveals to us. To be like God humans are called to live in relationship: in relationships of love. Man and woman are made to be in relationship with each other. They are created for communion with each other in order to share the blessing of companionship – a companionship marked by difference.

Human companionship finds fulfilment for the vast majority of men and women in stable relationships (especially the stable relationship of marriage). It finds fulfilment in relationships in which the partners make a gift of who and what they are to each other, giving themselves to each other... and also receiving each one from the other the gift being made. We see this to have been the case from the very beginning of the human story. This is still the case in our own day. For all the changes marriages have undergone, for all the difficulties marriages may lead people to experience, the concept of living with another in a married relationship has still not gone out of fashion... nor is it likely to do so. The sad reality of marital breakdown and divorce has not led people to stop marrying. It is led people to marry more than once rather than give up on marriage! From the beginning and still today men and women choose to share life together. People choose to have a unique companion: a partner who is seen, at one and the same time, as *flesh of one's flesh and bone of one's bone*, but a different type of person. As we have seen, in healthy relationships one completes the other with whom life is shared. It has to be said that even in same-sex relationships, difference between those who are united in friendship or by other bonds of companionship is absolutely fundamental for the health of the relationship. If a relationship between two people is just *the same seeking only the same* this will not make for a healthy situation. The relationship will not – indeed, cannot – work. We should remember that there are no two people who are exactly the same. Each and every person (whatever their similarity to another) is absolutely unique. This is the case even when it comes to those we refer to as *identical twins*. The similarities between people may serve to attract one person to another initially, but for the attraction of a couple to lead to an enduring relationship, and become something more, something deeper, there must be recognition and appreciation of each one's distinguishing and differentiating features. While man and woman are made to be in relationship with each other, and while they are created to live in companionship/communion with each other, their union is not only marked by, but is actually rooted in, built upon, and greatly enriched by, their fundamental differences. To say of another that they are *flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones* is not to say to them that they are just an extension of our self!

For us to recognise that we are *sexed* persons – persons who are male or female – is to recognise, as the word *sexed* implies: each one of us is incomplete in our self. To be a *sexed*

person (male or female) is to be cut off from persons of another gender than one's own. We are all incomplete without relationships with another, with others, of the opposite sex.

Men and women are different to each other – not only physically, but in other ways too. Indeed, any two creatures (including those of the same sex) are different to each other, because each one is unique. Humans who are just clones of another don't exist! There is no exact replica to any one of us.

I expect most of us are familiar with that book title which draws out the difference of the sexes: *Men and from Mars, Women are from Venus*. Poetry and song have emphasised the difference between the sexes. Comedy (another great vehicle of truth) does the same thing. We sometimes hear it said that the differences between men and women are so profound, or rather the differences between them are so subtle, that the opposite sexes simply cannot understand each other. While I believe the latter statement is a gross exaggeration, I think that we would all have to concede that there often are marked differences in the approach to things taken by the two sexes. Perhaps stereotypes held in our heads and hearts lead us to make the differences between the sexes more marked than they should, but differences do exist, I'm sure... at least up to a certain point.

The differences between men and women (between every person and another) should be seen for what they are in God's plan: a call to live a grace of mutual enrichment. It is always unfortunate when differences hold people apart more than they should. We are called to allow ourselves to be enriched by those who are different to us. For this to happen the first thing required of us is to see and appreciate each one's specificity and rejoice in each one's difference. This is very important in all our relationships – across the sexes and within them; across the generations and within them; across racial and social divides and within them.

I remember once hearing someone say to a group of men and women preparing for marriage something along the following lines as he sought to draw upon their shared experiences in courtship – a period in which they were discovering their future partner's sensibilities, as well as their own, through their close contact with each other. He stood before the group – looking at the men – and said: *Do you seem to be aggressive and competitive, need to feel superior, grow discouraged easily, deal with generalities, ignore details, reason logically and objectively and keep feelings inside.* He went on: *Many would say these are the general traits of a man in contemporary culture.* Then he turned to the women and looked at them and said: *Do you seem to manifest a capacity for endurance, be disposed to love, hold on to grudges and hate more easily, be concerned with details, think intuitively, show feelings with ease, be more religious?* To this he added: *Many would claim these are the typical characteristics of a woman in today's society.* When I heard what he said, I found it a bit of an exaggeration – very stereotypical, but I have to concede that in the group both the men and the women nodded as he spoke. Was their nodding their way of being polite or did they really agree with the speaker? Maybe the truth is in there somewhere between the two. Perhaps some were just being polite, while others were agreeing. I am not convinced that things are as clear-cut as that man pretended, nor am I convinced that they should be. I would contest that we should be vigilant not to close ourselves or others into stereotypes. I am inclined to believe that both men and women can carry within them what he described as the characteristics of both sexes in their person. I would say that, at the end of the day, the important thing for all of us is to seek to allow ourselves to be enriched by those who are different to us; to allow their difference to impact upon us and accept that the characteristics in them, which contrast with our own, to rub off on us for our good.

When we look at Jesus Christ we see how He incarnated both male and female qualities. St Paul tells us that Jesus who was *the perfect image of the Godhead*. He held everything together in His person. Striving to be like Jesus – *images of God* – we must strive to allow

what that speaker I just referred to called the male and female characteristics to shine through us. For that to happen we must all be open to receive from each other; we must be open to being enriched by each other. We must also be open to the idea of enriching others out of the deposit of good within us. If it is important for us to do this across the sexes, it also in our relationships with people of our own sex. Mutuality, complementarity, are God-given gifts which are to be encouraged and rejoiced in. Mutuality and complementarity are life-giving. To live in love with another is to rejoice in the difference of the other – seeing it not as a menace or a threat, but as a blessing, a grace, an enrichment. If our reading of the Scripture texts of this day helped us to see just that... and, moreover, to commit ourselves to live in its light, then I would say our reading of the word of God proposed for our meditation this morning will have served its purpose and blessed us. Moreover, it will have disposed to become a greater blessing for others. Amen!