

SERMON for Pentecost 20 with Blessing of the Animals – October 6th, 2024.

Readings: Genesis 2: 18-24; Psalm 8; Hebrews 1: 1-4, 2: 5-12; Mark 10: 2-16.

Our readings at the moment are fairly challenging, and this week is no exception.

Many of us have experienced or have had family or close friends who have experienced a marriage or committed relationship divorce, with all the pain and suffering that can involve.

There are two things about today's Gospel reading which we need to hold in the forefront of our minds:

Firstly, as always, context is the prime importance – I will speak more about that shortly.

Secondly, we should note that Jesus is responding to a rhetorical question posed by the Pharisees not a pastoral question by someone struggling with a difficult marriage or relationship issues and considering the way forward. His response therefore is both about debate with someone interested in the principle and also an opportunity to point to the highest ideal. Jesus seems to be letting his questioners know that he is fully aware of the law that allows for divorce but then, by referring to the Genesis text, reminding them of the spiritual basis of marriage and of the high ideal of marriage as union.¹

Putting it into its context is always a good thing with any piece of Scripture!!

We miss the main indicator for the context of the passage by starting the reading at verse two. Verse one sets it up:

He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them. [Mark 10:1]

If you were in church last couple of Sundays, you may remember that Jesus and the disciples had gone 'home' to Capernaum, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Well, now they had left there (that place) and travelled south into Judea and were near the river Jordan.

The Pharisees ask Jesus, "is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" [Mark 10:2]. Jesus answers them but later explains it further to his disciples.

Bishop Tom Wright put this in some perspective for me, explaining about the trap the Pharisees were attempting to lay before Jesus:

Jesus only gives the detailed answer (to the Pharisees question) when he is safely in the house with the disciples. Why? Look where the incident takes place, it is down by the Jordan, in the Judean wilderness, where John the Baptist used to minister, preach and baptise.

Why did John get put into prison and finally lose his head? For criticizing Herod Antipas for marrying his brother's wife! Okay, this isn't the only reason for what Jesus has to say about divorce, but it certainly brings the story into three-dimensional reality.²

John, and others' criticism of Herod and his irregular marital arrangements, had led to charges of treason, and this was the trap the Pharisees were trying to lead Jesus into. Jesus' question about what Moses said about divorce, was not about what was written in Deuteronomy 24, which the Pharisees quoted back at him, but rather referring further back to this morning's Old Testament reading.

In that first reading, we heard of the creation of woman, helpmate and partner, 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh':

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. [Genesis 2:24]

This is the relationship that Jesus believes God desires for a husband and wife - a bond - not merely a working relationship, a political or economic alliance, but a new entity,

hopefully based on love. A love commitment between two people – a good, healthy, creative relationship.

In the second part of our gospel, we hear of a second invitation Jesus makes to the children to come forward and be an example of how to be citizens of God's kingdom.

Following the incident with the Pharisees, the disciples question Jesus about the divorce issue. Then we hear that the disciples are trying to keep away people who were bringing the children for Jesus to bless.

Jesus responds to this by insisting not only that the little ones be allowed to come but that we all need to be like the little ones. In this, Jesus is pointing not so much to the cute and treasured but the unimportant and vulnerable, the unseen and unheard ones, the dependent and overlooked.

Revd Sue says:

Jesus welcomes us, embraces us, in our brokenness. And even more than welcoming us Jesus joins us in our humanity. For as the author of Hebrews puts it: "... we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." (Hebrews 2:9) Jesus joined us in our humanity to the point of tasting death. Jesus has not only great compassion for our flawed and failing nature but has joined us in our predicament.¹

Today, after communion, we will be blessing our furry, feathered and scaly friends, celebrating something of the abundance of God's creation.

Something struck me about the idea of God's marriage to creation – God's relationship with the created order, the natural world, its creatures and, of course, us, the most advanced but most destructive of creation.

The psalmist writes:

⁴ When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers:
the moon and the stars which you have set in order,

⁵ What are we, that you should be mindful of us:
what are we, that you should care for us?

⁶ Yet you have made us little less than gods:
and have crowned us with glory and honour.

⁷ You have given us dominion over your handiwork:
and have put all things in subjection beneath our feet,

⁸ All sheep and oxen:
and all the creatures of the field,

⁹ The birds of the air and the fish of the sea:
and everything that moves

in the pathways of the great waters. [Psalm 8: 4-9]

In the Franciscan tradition, we have been left with many stories of Francis' interaction with the natural world – preaching to the birds, taming a murderously rampaging wolf, and yet he worked tirelessly for the poor, the sick and all the while spreading the gospel to all who would listen, not safely, tucked away behind monastery walls, but out on the road, living a life of simplicity and humble service.

Francis tried something few have attempted, to follow Jesus, as literally as he could, to live the gospel. He turned his back on the wealth of his merchant father, he gave away all his worldly possessions, like Jesus invited the rich young man to do. Had he lived today, he would probably have been locked away in a mental institution, but for all that, his legacy has lasted over 800 years.

For me, the Franciscan ideals of “living simply, in harmony and spreading the love and knowledge of Jesus Christ” make sense and gives deeper meaning as I try to live a Christian life.

So, today, as we give thanks for the furry, feathered and possibly scaly who have become our friends and companions in life, we remember the unconditional love and companionship they give us. As one wit quipped: Dog is God spelt backwards, and if we want to understand God’s unconditional love for us, we just need to gaze into the eyes of a dog!

I close with a Franciscan Collect:

God, our Father,
you always delight to reveal yourself to the childlike and lowly of heart:
grant that, following the example of our blessed father, Francis,
we may count the wisdom of the world as foolishness
and know only Jesus Christ and him crucified;
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.³

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

1. Revd Sue Lodge-Calvert, *Jesus joins us in our brokenness*, on her blog www.companionsontheway.com posted on October 2, 2024.
2. Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, © 2001, 2004, SPCK, pp. 129-133.
3. Collect for the Feast of St Francis, Society of St Francis.