

Our Lady of Lourdes

Twenty-Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time

October 4, 2009

Readings:

Genesis 2:18-24

Hebrews 2:9-11

Mark 10:2-16

“Some Pharisees came [to Jesus], and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" What is going on here? Why is it a temptation? Well, to start with, the Pharisee never had any doubts about the dissolubility of marriage. The Old Testament Law took the lawfulness of divorce and remarriage for granted and all the Pharisees accepted that. It says: If a man takes a wife, and after they are married she is displeasing to him because of something objectionable in her, let him give her a statement in writing and send her away from his house. And when she has gone away from him, she may become another man's wife, according to Deuteronomy. The only disagreement among the various schools of the Pharisees was: What is the meaning of this “something objectionable” that a husband would find in his wife to justify divorce? The conservative school of Judaism said it meant only a case of scandal, like adultery. The liberal school of Rabbi's said it meant any case of annoyance, “even if she has burned his supper.” And the even more liberal school of others said that the woman did not have to be guilty of anything; that the man simply no longer fancied her was enough reason for divorce.

This was a trap because if Jesus took sides with one school of thought, he would antagonize himself with the others. In reply Jesus went above the law as given in Deuteronomy to the mind of God as revealed in Genesis. He went from the Mosaic law to the divine plan in creation. From the beginning of creation, he said, God ordained husband and wife to live in unity. “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mark 10:9). Jesus' reply underlines two important points. First point, Jesus treats the woman as a person. Earlier Jewish law treated her as property of the man to be disposed of at will. In fact, here for the first time in Hebrew literature we hear not just of the man divorcing the woman but also of the woman taking the initiative to divorce the man. Jesus treats the woman as a legal person equal to the man. Second point, Jesus is interested in teaching not legal statements but moral principles. They asked him whether divorce was lawful; his reply was that the mind of God, the ideal, what all people hope for when they marry, what all couples must strive for is for husband and wife never to separate. They asked him about what was lawful; he told them what was best for them, what they should always hope for. For in Christ “All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up” (1 Corinthians 10:23).

Jesus is not laying down a law in our Gospel reading today. He is, again, stating the ideal and the way things should be. It's about the mind of God, but it is also about the hopes of those who marry. It is not a discourse on condemnation, or scornfully looking at failure when a marriage comes to an end, or a true marriage never existed. Instead, it's something about raising expectations of his listeners: looking at equality between two people, and striving for the ideal in love. Christ always spoke about hope, and looking for the best in all situations, and the best in all people.