

Homily for the Twenty Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) 04/10/09)

Today's gospel reading shocks us. It seems so uncompromising, so black and white. It shocked the disciples too, of course, that is why they challenged Jesus in private about what he had said to the Pharisees: did he really mean what he had said? It isn't an easy subject for us to address, because in today's world almost any family, any group of people, has some experience of marriage breakdown. It will have been the source of huge pain and suffering, and those who have not experienced it directly are rightly very reluctant to say too much: who are we to comment on the difficult and painful decisions that others have had to make?

But, all the same, we are faced with today's gospel reading. It would be a great deal easier to pass over the first part of the reading and to talk, instead, about being nice and welcoming to children, but that wouldn't be very satisfactory. So, let's look at the first part of the gospel. What is Jesus talking about? Jesus is setting out for the Pharisees God's dream for human fulfilment through marriage. It is part of God's plan for us, part of his dream, that some of us at least should choose married life, and that in married life we will find great fulfilment, great happiness. I have mentioned before the image of marriage as two people helping each other get to Heaven (see Leonie Caldecott 'What Do Catholics Believe?' p.7), and this is precisely what God wants us to experience. God's will, his plan, his longing, is that through an intimate partnership of life and love (*Gaudium et Spes* n.48) we should find happiness and fulfilment on earth, and that this will be our pathway to Heaven.

In fact, when I talk to couples who are preparing for marriage, this is just what they want, too. They may not articulate it in exactly those words, but as we talk about marriage, it is very clear that they want the closeness, the strength, the joy, the fulfilment that comes from knowing that they love someone, that this person treasures their love, and loves them in return. God's dream for marriage life is, in fact, exactly the same as our dreams for married life: given that God created us, this is hardly surprising.

God's plan for marriage is set out in the very beginning of the Book of Genesis: 'the two become one body'. This is precisely what Jesus repeats in the gospel, and precisely what the Church means when it describes marriage as an intimate partnership of life and love. So, we are not shocked by Jesus expectations of marriage, as they are exactly the same as our own. What shocks us is just how effective human sinfulness and selfishness is in undermining and poisoning this dream. It is not shocking that Jesus wants us to achieve the highest fulfilment in marriage, it is shocking that we manage to get it so badly wrong. It is shocking that we sometimes manage to enter marriage carelessly or thoughtlessly, or that one or other parties to a marriage withholds that intimacy, that self-giving partnership, that love which is life-giving and life-enhancing.

So God's vision of marriage is that it is a place of fulfilment for the couple, and for any children that they might have. It is a place where people dare to love, and to know that they are loved. I always tell couples who are getting married here to speak that promise of love carefully, but also to listen to it carefully. It is a great commitment to promise to love someone. Love is an act of the will, not a feeling or an emotion. On their wedding day that couple is saying, regardless of how I feel on any given day, I commit myself to living my life differently because of you. I make a decision, I make a choice, and that choice is you. On their wedding day, each of the people becomes a chosen person. They shut down all the other possibilities, all the other ways of life that they could have chosen, and very simply they look each other in the eye and say 'I choose you'. It is a powerful moment, this moment of choice, this promise to love. It is not something we can take on lightly, because it will have an impact on everything we do and say for the rest of our lives; but, and this is very important, it also has a powerful impact on the person who hears it. On their wedding day both man and woman, husband and wife, realises that they are a chosen person. There is someone beside them who has rejected all the other possibilities that life offers, and has chosen them. When they wake up the next day, the question for both husband and wife, the daily question, becomes 'what will I do today to renew this choice, so that day after day my husband, my wife, knows that they are a chosen person', with all the sense of self-worth, with all the courage and the hope that this brings.

God's plan is that in marriage we love, and know that we are loved. But it is also his plan that we know another person, and are known by them. Because this person has made such a radical, extraordinary commitment to me, I can dare to let them know me as I really am. They have promised to love me, so I need not be afraid that they will laugh at my hopes, scoff at my dreams. The mask that I use to protect the real me from friends and acquaintances, because I am scared that they may not like the real me, or may use my weakness to get power over me, that mask can come down with this person who has promised to love me. This is what the Church means when it describes marriage as an intimate partnership. It cannot be a real partnership unless both people are prepared to reveal themselves to each other, and to treasure the other person's revelation of themselves. This longing for the freedom to be ourselves, to achieve real intimacy, is deeply implanted within humanity. St Paul sees intimacy with God, knowing and being known, as one of the things we look forward to in Heaven: *'Now we see only reflections in a mirror, mere riddles, but then we shall be seeing face to face. Now I can know only imperfectly; but then I shall know just as fully as I am myself known'* (1 Cor. 13.12). Intimacy is not really about sexuality, it is about a radical mutual openness. That openness and vulnerability is certainly expressed physically by married people, but it is much wider than mere physicality.

I could talk for hours about God's plan, his dream, for humanity in marriage. It is something infinitely precious, but it is also something that through our selfishness, or our laziness, or our foolishness, we manage to damage, to cheapen, even to wreck. All of us have to live with imperfection, and with the disappointment that comes from our own weakness, the weakness that means, to our shame, we fail to live up to the promises that we have made. But it is good for us to be shocked by today's gospel, shocked into remembering just how wonderful is the gift of marriage, and it is good for those of us who are married to be challenged to recapture together something of that dream. For those of us who are not married, but hope one day to be, this reflection on God's hope for us is a part of our marriage preparation: until we are ready for such an adventure, we are not ready to marry, and the same is true of the partner we may choose. Of course, we will sometimes get it wrong, maybe even badly wrong, but everyone who plans to marry has the right to expect that the person they choose will at least share such a dream as this, even if achieving it requires a lifetime of trying, of changing, of growing.