

October 3, 2021

Gn 2:18-24; Heb 2:9-11; Mk 10:2-16

Many people wonder why the Catholic Church takes such a strong position on marriage. Why does the Church insist that once you are married and get a divorce, you are still married? Why is it a problem to divorce and remarry? Why does the Church not just be quiet on these things and let people go along in the way society says is OK? What's the big deal?

In the Gospel today, Jesus is met by Pharisees who ask him this question: *Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?* Now, they already had a procedure for divorce in the law - so apparently it was - in one way of thinking - "lawful" - so what were they asking? Actually their question is not whether or not divorce is lawful, but what are the reasons a man can divorce his wife. They are trying to get Jesus to side with one group in the dispute over the other and so divide his followers, instead, Jesus clarifies for all of us what being "lawful" truly means.

The Pharisees in the Gospel are assuming, as many do today, that divorce and remarriage is OK - after all Moses inserted a law saying it is the husband's "choice" - it is his "right" to send away his wife if she (as it says) "displeases" him. Jesus states that this is a human law and actually is at odds with the Divine law and what God intends for marriage. He quotes Genesis and shows that God has revealed that in the union of marriage the two have mysteriously become one flesh - you can't separate this without serious damage. He then authoritatively says that what God has joined (marriage involves a Divine intervention) humans must not separate. He finally says that if you divorce and remarry you commit adultery - a very strong statement that indicates that the persons are still married after the divorce. There may be times for health reasons, or because of an unsafe situation, that husband and wife must live apart - and the Church recognizes the realities of human life and of the failings of others and has understanding for this. But, following Jesus, affirms that a legal action of a human court does not end the marriage. The Church upholds the indissolubility of marriage (meaning it cannot be dissolved) because Jesus is so clear on this point. However, the deeper question is ... why does He say this - why is God so concerned with marriage anyway?

To understand God's concern, we have to see three things: (1) That when marriage is able to be dissolved, people may put less effort into resolving problems, and a certain selfishness can settle in. Since husbands and wives always "displease" each other at some points, without

lifelong commitment we would be left with the unstable, erratic and shifting relationships that we see in the hollywood actor or actress on their fifth marriage (that is now on the rocks). With this instability family life is also not stable, leading to the many complications of divorced and rebounded families. With that family instability society as a whole becomes less stable - as some say is currently happening. (2) Marriage is an intentional symbol of God's relationship to people. We see in Old Testament, prophets liken God's relationship to humanity as a fruitful marriage. St. Paul also likens Christ's union with the Church as a marriage in one flesh. Marriage is meant to be a visible sacramental sign for the world of the relationship of God that does not quit, a God that does not put the other aside because they "displease" Him - a God that always remains faithful - even if one party in the union makes being together impossible. In faithfully living out the marital commitment we give witness to the world of who God is - and draw people to that faithful, patient, and ever-loving God. (3) If we look at the passage in Genesis in the first reading (the passage that Jesus is referring to) we see that God made us for such a union. The human is separated into two compatible half that are only complete again when they are joined. God has made humans for a spousal relationship. Either as married husband and wife begetting children, as a widow or widower who maintains their fidelity to their prior spouse or enters into a union with another or unites in chase fidelity to others and continues parenting as a grandparent or mentor to others; or as a celibate such as myself who is in a spousal relationship with the church begetting spiritual children.

The message is: this is what truly completes us. Not the filling of my own desires and satisfying myself as a single unit - thinking that I can just keep changing partners until I find the person who I will never have a conflict with (that person does not exist). Completion is not found in simply refusing to enter into marriage - trying to get needs met in a a string of relationship that can end at any time. We are made to be completed in devoting ourselves to another in faithful self-giving love and bringing out of that relationship new life. In this we create a stable society, we image for the world the fidelity of God, and Jesus' complete self-donation to death in giving His life to redeem us - letting the world know this is indeed a great mission, and is part of us having a satisfying life here on earth. This is why God is so insistent on the importance of marriage, this is why the Church follows suit and calls all of us to follow the command and wisdom of God, and do the same.