

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 128 (127); Hebrews 2:9-11; Mark 10:2-16

Therefore what God joined together, let no one separate

Mark 10:2 Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” 3 He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” 4 They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” 5 But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 6 But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ 7 ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, 8 and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9 Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

10 Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 11 He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; 12 and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 14 But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 15 Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” 16 And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This text calls for careful exploration and courageous exposition. There will almost certainly be people “in second relationships” in the Sunday congregation and this should temper any insensitive pronouncements. At the same time, there is no doubt that life-long commitment remains the Christian ideal, going back to Jesus himself.

By the first century AD, women in the Roman empire could initiate divorce. Romans considered mutual consent to be essential to the viability of marriage and the absence of consent was deemed sufficient reason to dissolve a union. No stigma attached to divorce as it was quite common. Jewish custom varied and Jews often followed local custom. However, within Palestinian Judaism, a woman could not, for the most part, initiate divorce proceedings.

KIND OF WRITING

- (i) A debate with the Pharisees, which is answered using the book of Genesis.
- (ii) A discussion with the disciples—the typical inner circle of Mark’s Gospel.
- (iii) An action anecdote (or *chreia*) regarding access to Jesus as an illustration for access to the Kingdom.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

In the Hebrew Bible, divorce is permitted, but only implicitly, as we read in this example of “case law”:

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession. (Deut 24:1–4)

Against that implied permission, you have the prophet Malachi speaking thus:

Thought for the day

At present, the culture hesitates before the long-term commitments such as life-long marriage. Perhaps wisely! And yet, there is freedom in commitment. It is possible to walk the quaysides looking for various options for the journey. At that time, you have freedom of *choice*. However, if you want to get any where, one vessel will have to be selected. That is the freedom of *choosing*, choosing not to remain in the paralysis of choice. Once made, commitment opens up to another level of living and loving and being loved in return.

Prayer

Creator God, you know our hearts and in your wisdom you have made us for each other, knowing that it is not good to be alone. In our committed relationships, help to find freedom and love, life and joy. Amen.

For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel, and covering one’s garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless. (Mal 2:16)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

As is well-known, at the time of Jesus there were two schools of thought regarding divorce, one strict and the other liberal. The problem lay with the expression “something objectionable” (literally, “nakedness of a thing”). Did it mean specifically unfaithfulness or did it mean anything at all “objectionable.” The followers of Hillel took the latter view, while the followers of Shammai took the former. Jesus sided with Shammai, in terms of strictness. Matthew alone has “except on the grounds of unchastity.”

Matthew

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

(Matthew 5:31–32)

Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” They said to him, “Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?” He said to them, “It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.” (Matthew 19:3–9)

Luke

“Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery. (Luke 16:18)

ST PAUL

To the rest I say—I and not the Lord—that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you. Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife. (1 Corinthians 7:12–16)

Note

On historical critical grounds, it is likely that Luke’s version is the earliest and most primitive. He has neither the exception of Matthew nor the updating of Mark to take in women initiating proceedings. Again, on historical critical grounds, it is more or less certain that the historical Jesus spoke against divorce, without qualification (in which case, he is more severe than Shammai). In Qumran, the same ideal was upheld (CD 4:19-5:2). However, another question is raised by scholars. Does the teaching of Jesus represent an ideal or a law?

Matthew’s community at least tolerated a level of divorce for the specific reason of unfaithfulness. Paul too adjusted the absolute prohibition in the light of a particular case. So, the New Testament data leave us with a conundrum: the ideal goes back to Jesus and divorce is to be resisted as opposed to the values of the Kingdom; at the same time, the New Testament provides evidence of pastoral accommodation to deal with real situations in people’s lives.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 2 The question seems a little odd. It was already lawful. The rabbis discussed the grounds for divorce. Mark exposes their bad intention with the word “test”, that is, to expose Jesus as somehow unorthodox.

Verse 3 A classical reply, containing a trap because Jesus will go behind the teaching of Moses to God.

Verse 4 Deut 24:1-4 and some other passages.

Verse 5 That is, it was a concession to weakness rather than an eternal rule.

Verse 6 In classical rabbinic style, Jesus quotes Genesis: *So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.* (Genesis 1:27) What Moses permitted violated the creator’s original intentions.

Verses 7-8 Again, Jesus is citing Genesis: *Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.* (Genesis 2:24) Jesus then draws a conclusion: they are one by God’s joining.

Verse 9 This concludes the dispute. Life-long commitment is the ideal since creation.

Verse 10 Typical for Mark, the privacy of this conversation is signalled by “in the house.”

Verse 11 The missing term is in the previous story: divorce does not dissolve the marriage bond and even the apparent remarriage is actually adultery.

Verse 12 Although Jewish women could later initiate divorce proceedings, certainly in Palestinian Judaism this was not yet possible. This is an example of Mark’s *aggiornamento* or updating of a teaching of Jesus, in a later post-Easter and Roman context.

Verse 13 The next section is primarily about the kingdom and not about chil-

dren. We are not told why the disciples blocked access to Jesus. It might be the old questions of status as in Mk 9:34. More kindly, perhaps one could think of Mark 6:31, 34.

Verse 14 Indignation is a good translation here. The story quickly becomes an action *chreia* or anecdote designed to illustrate entry into the kingdom.

Verse 15 Children represent here not innocence but powerlessness, that is, real dependence upon and openness to God. Receiving as a child means without regard either to merit or to one’s status in the kingdom.

Verse 16 An appealing, delightful scene often represented in art.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Marriages do break down, but in this story Jesus appears as the wise person urging people to seek first the original harmony where possible, rather than seek escape routes when difficulties arise. When have you found that, in marriage or in other relationships, the bonds have been strengthened when you have been prepared to work through difficulties?

2. There are other things that we needlessly and wrongly put in opposition: young and old, male and female, people from different cultures, body and soul. Perhaps at times you have discovered the advantages of exploring the richness in combining such apparently exclusive opposites.

3. The children in the second story can be taken as representing any group of ‘little ones’ whose opinion we may be inclined to dismiss. When have you found that you have been taught an important lesson about life, about love, or about faith by people whose views you had been inclined to dismiss?

PRAYER

Creator God, in Christ you call man and woman to the fulness of glory for which you created them in your image. Heal our hardened hearts, renew our obedience to your will, and conform our lives to your gracious design.

Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father

Heb 2:6 *But someone has testified somewhere, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? 7 You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honour, 8 subjecting all things under their feet." Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, 9* but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Heb. 2:10 It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. 11 For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, 12 saying, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you."

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Everyone acknowledges the richness and difficulty of the Letter to the Hebrews. Perhaps because of the latter, it may be somewhat neglected—although not in the lectionary. Each year, passages are read at Christmas, Lent and Good Friday. Also, some Sundays of years B and C are devoted to the letter. Certain parts of the letter are familiar and beloved and it is to these somewhat less difficult excerpts that the lectionary turns.

KIND OF WRITING

As Eugene Boring dryly remarked, the Letter of St Paul to the Hebrews is not a letter, neither is it by St Paul, nor is it to the Hebrews. It is, in reality, a sermon, very close to 1 Peter and 1 Clement in style and content. 1 Clement (AD 95/96) quotes from it and that gives us a date before which Hebrews must have been written. It seems to have been written after the destruction of the Temple, given that the information about the cult appears to be taken from the Pentateuch rather than from observation of what actually took place in the first century. The author is unknown, although writing broadly within the Pauline tradition. He seems unaware of the Gospels and

even other stories about Jesus. It may be said, however, that the author is a master of Greek language and rhetoric; he enjoyed a very high education, including Middle Platonism; his Bible is the Greek OT (the LXX). On balance, the homily appears to have been written to Roman Christians by a Roman Christian teacher, writing from abroad.

Finally, the writer has set himself a difficult task: to account for Jesus' death and resurrection, using the imagery of priesthood and temple. Why was this difficult? (1) Jesus himself was not a priest but layman. (2) Jesus, like his mentor John the Baptist, was critical of the Temple system. (3) Jesus bypassed the OT priestly system and brought people into direct contact with God. We may add that the brutal death of Jesus, in public disgrace on a cross, was the polar opposite of the ritual purity required for true Temple sacrifice.

To sustain his use of the temple and priesthood, the writer has to show that the Levitical priesthood was abolished and that Jesus fulfilled an older, superior type of priesthood. The key insight is that Jesus became such a priest, not by the Levitical system of separation, but, on the contrary, by immersing himself in common humanity. This is the key teaching of our passage and indeed of of Hebrews as a whole.

The reading come from a longer section in 23:5-18. Vv. 5-9 take up the superiority of Jesus; vv. 10-18 focus on his solidarity with his followers.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The "audience" of this sermon seems, from internal evidence, to have been a mixed community of Jewish and Gentile Christians, undergoing some kind of harassment. The letter is rich in direct moral exhortation, giving us a window on perceived "issues" in the community.

RELATED PASSAGES

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore

approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 9 The preceding discussion established Jesus' superiority to the angels, even though he was made lower than the angels (i.e. in the incarnation). The emphasis falls here not on Jesus' death but on his exaltation (i.e. resurrection).

Verse 10 The representative son of man from Ps 8, cited at the start, is now taken up. Although "one of us", Jesus was also a pioneer in opening for us the path to God. Cf. Heb 12:12. *Salvation* is a key term in Hebrews: Heb 1:14; 2:3, 10; 5:9; 6:9; 9:28; 11:7. *Perfected* is also a key term, in contrast with the repeated sacrifices of the Temple, which needed to be repeated and were therefore imperfect (Heb 2:10; 5:9; 7:19, 28; 9:9; 10:1, 14; 11:40; 12:23). It is important to note that Hebrews, while using the language of sacrifice, does not teach the traditional doctrine of redemption (Adam's sin, God's anger etc.). There was indeed a sacrifice, not of atonement but of communion, that is, fellowship and solidarity.

Verse 11 Not only do we share the same humanity with Jesus, we share the same Father. See Heb 4:14-16 above. This sense of solidarity is confirmed by the use of Psalm 22 (cf. Mark's Passion).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. It is often the case that a shared experience—often difficult—helps us to help each other. E.g. in the AA. Where in my life have I become aware of this?
2. To say someone is like a brother or sister to me is very complimentary and rich. Who are those in my life, perhaps beyond my natural family, who have been such brothers and sisters to me?
3. To acknowledge our common Father is to relativise the barriers we erect between humans, "whose father is the same."

PRAYER

Loving God we thank you for our fellowship in Jesus, with each other. Jesus knows us, lovingly, compassionately, from the inside out and we thank you.

And the two become one flesh

Gen. 2:18 Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” 19 So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. 20 The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. 21 So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. 22 And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.”

24 Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

A pastoral note to begin: the reading clearly comes from a patriarchal culture which gives primacy to males. The woman being born from the man—an arresting image—goes against the common experience. The first creation story gives a much more equal place to both men and women as the image of God. Perhaps some seeds of later equality may be found in the teaching on the complementarity of the sexes.

Bearing in mind the cultural limits of the passage, there is a marvellous teaching on the relationship between spouses, best illustrated in the note of joy in the recognition, “bone of my bones etc” in v.23.

KIND OF WRITING

Technically, we have here an etiological tale, that is, a story which accounts for aspects of human life and culture. The topic here is the complementarity of the sexes and the mutuality of male/female, leading to marriage and procreation.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The book of Genesis is the most likely the fruit of a long evolution, taking place

sometimes between the 8th and the 5th century BC. Broadly, it bears the marks of interaction with the successive empires, cultures and religions of Assyria, Babylon and Persia.

Genesis is in two large sections: Creation to the Tower of Babel
Family stories of Israel’s ancestors

In turn, the first part has this layout:

- a. Two stories of creation (1:1-2:25)
- b. Two stories of disobedience (3-4)
- c. From Adam to Noah (5)
- d. The birth of the Giants (6:1-4)
- e. The Flood (6:5-9:17)
- f. The Tower of Babel (11:1-9)
- g. From Shem to Abraham (11:10-32)

The two creation stories come from different times. Genesis 2 is most likely the older of the two.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

On deep sleep used by God

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. (Gen 15:12)

So David took the spear that was at Saul’s head and the water jar, and they went away. No one saw it, or knew it, nor did anyone awake; for they were all asleep, because a deep sleep from the Lord had fallen upon them. (1 Sam 26:12)

For the Lord has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep; he has closed your eyes, you prophets, and covered your heads, you seers. (Is 29:10)

On monogamy (using the metaphor of cistern for the woman as wife and mother through whom flow waters of life)

Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well. Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be for yourself alone, and not for sharing with strangers. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. May her breasts satisfy you at all times; may you be intoxicated always by her love. Why should you be intoxicated, my son, by another woman and embrace the bosom of an adulteress? For human ways are under the eyes of the Lord, and he examines all their paths. The iniquities of the wicked ensnare them, and they are caught in the toils of their sin.

They die for lack of discipline, and because of their great folly they are lost. (Prov 5:15–23)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 18 The human is made for companionship.

Verse 19 Naming is vital: until we have a word for something we cannot place it in our world of reference.

Verse 20 The point here is that the human is a very different kind of animal.

Verse 21 Sleep is used by God elsewhere for intervention (see the texts below). The rib does not imply inferiority but mutuality.

Verse 22 The second creation story shows God as very much “hands on.”

Verse 23 Whenever the prose breaks into poetry (as here), we have a moment of highest emotional intensity. At this point the early word-play on (*adam*, *adamah*) is abandoned in favour of another (*ish*, *ishshah*).

Verse 24 This accounts for marriage and lays the basis for a prohibition on promiscuity.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. “It is not good for the man to be alone.” Who are my companions on the journey of life? Thanksgiving prayer.

2. The joy of mutual recognition and acceptance is a key to happiness. Can I go back on my own experience and name the person or persons who really matter in my life?

3. Reflection from Pedro Arrupe SJ:

Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evening, how you will spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love and it will decide everything.

PRAYER

You are indeed holy and to be glorified, O God, who love the human race and who always walk with us on the journey of life. Help us to recognise your presence in the people you send to us on the way.

THE LITURGY

Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 128 (127); Hebrews 2:9-11; Mark 10:2-16

READINGS 1 AND 3

The reading offers us the essential background for the argument in Mark 10, which takes us back to the ideals of the time of creation.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 128 (127) is one of the pilgrimage psalm (“Songs of Ascent”). It starts with a beatitude (happy is...) and it continues the topics of the preceding Psalm: children as a blessing, family, labour, the welfare of Israel. It has features as well of the wisdom Psalms (fear of the Lord). The Psalm is also a reminder while it seems that worship is a human act, the real actor is God himself.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Genesis 2:18-24

The love between man and woman intrigued the ancients, as indeed it still fascinates us today. Using the mythology of the time, the writer explores the mystery of the mutual attraction of the sexes.

Second Reading

Hebrews 2:9-11

Peer ministry is the key to many counselling situations—for example AA. In this reading, the writer tells us that Jesus can help us because he has become one of us, being like us in all things.

Gospel

Mark 6:1-6a

The big questions have a way of staying the same. What do you do when marriage breaks down? Jesus holds up a positive vision and ideal, quite challenging for us today.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Jonah is a novella, not a historical writing. It was most likely written at the time after the Exile when the leaders—such as Ezra and Nehemiah—wanted to limit God’s love to the nation of Israel. Jonah is against such narrow nationalism—a necessary voice today.

Given that the book is short and actually enter-

taining, why not read it all this week?

Monday 4 October

St Francis of Assisi

Jonah 1:1-2:1, 11

This reading sets up the opening story of the very reluctant prophet Jonah, but God “nets” him at the end.

Luke 10:25-37

The teaching of this passage is very clear and needs almost no comment. The mention of the Samaritan—traditionally despised—creates an intentional shock. To recreate the sense of shock, we need to explore our own prejudices. Is there anyone in our society of whom we would *not* expect such goodness?

Tuesday 5 October

Jonah 3:1-10

Jonah is called a second time and proclaims God’s word among the people of Nineveh, who are non-Jews. To his surprise (and chagrin), they listen to him! Even the cows do penance—part of the witty exaggeration of the book. Bovine sins do not feature elsewhere in the Bible.

Luke 10:38-42

Balancing life and prayer, the active and the contemplative, is always a challenge. Years ago, Archbishop Temple noted that it is not that action matters and prayer helps, but rather that prayer matters and action is its test. In this way, he moves away from the tempting either/or towards a more integrated approach.

Wednesday 6 October

St Bruno, priest and monk

Jonah 4:1-11

Jonah is very disappointed because his preaching is successful (!) and he gets to see no fireworks against Nineveh. God’s outreach beyond the confines of Israel is exactly the point of the book, which ends with a great question from God.

Luke 11:1-4

The Lord’s Prayer arises in Matthew and Luke. Luke’s setting is much more realistic and may touch our own need to be taught how to pray. The prayer is also briefer and may be close to the orig-

inal. Lord, teach us to pray!

Thursday 7 October

Our Lady of the Rosary

Malachi 3:13-20

Our reading reflects on a questions we all feel from time to time: what’s the point in believing, seeing that evil does evidently prosper?

Luke 11:5-13

There’s a double teaching here, a kind of marvellous tension between persistence / resistance and the natural desire to give what is good to you children.

Friday 8 October

The book prophet Joel comes from the post-Exilic period, some time around 445-353 BC. It is usually regarded as a late book because of its cross-references to other books and on account of its complex eschatology.

Joel 1:13-15, 2:1-2

This reading sounds more like something for Ash Wednesday: it is a clarion call to repentance, to a change of heart and of life.

Luke 11:15-26

It still shocks that some people attributed Jesus’ powers to the spirit of evil. There is, however, a kind of logic: if not from God, then from where? Jesus’ own logic is irrefutable: even evil cannot be self-destructive!

Saturday 9 October

St John Henry Newman, priest and religious

Joel 4:12-21

You might sometimes wonder where our images regarding the end of time come from. This reading is the source of much of it—a bit scary, but at the same time “the Lord will be a shelter for his people”. The reading closes on a positive note.

Luke 11:27-28

This is an unexpected story, given the substantial profile of the mother of Jesus in Luke 1-2. The unknown woman utters a beatitude, an acclamation of blessing. Jesus, in his reply, gives an *a fortiori* response, profiling the hearing and keeping of the word of God.