

Reading for the 27th Sunday of the Year

FIRST READING: Genesis 2:18-24

A reading from the Book of Genesis:

The LORD God said: "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him." So the LORD God formed out of the ground various wild animals and various birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each of them would be its name. The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of the air, and all wild animals; but none proved to be the suitable partner for the man. So the LORD God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. The LORD God then built up into a woman the rib that he had taken from the man. When he brought her to the man, the man said: "This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called 'woman,' for out of 'her man' this one has been taken." That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one flesh.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 128:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6

May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives.

Blessed are you who fear the LORD, who walk in his ways! For you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork; blessed shall you be, and favored.

May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives.

Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the recesses of your home; your children like olive plants around your table.

May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives.

Behold, thus is the man blessed who fears the LORD. The LORD bless you from Zion: may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life.

May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives.

May you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel!

May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives.

SECOND READING: Hebrews 2:9-11

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews:

Brothers and sisters: He "for a little while" was made "lower than the angels," that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting that he, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the leader to their salvation perfect through suffering. He who consecrates and those who are being consecrated all have one origin. Therefore, he is not ashamed to call them "brothers."

The word of the Lord.

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark:

The Pharisees approached Jesus and asked, "Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?" They were testing him. He said to them in reply, "What did Moses command you?" They replied, "Moses permitted a husband to write a bill of divorce and dismiss her." But Jesus told them, "Because of the hardness of your hearts he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. 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, no human being must separate." In the house the disciples again questioned Jesus about this. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." And people were bringing children to him that he might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this he became indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it." Then he embraced them and blessed them, placing his hands on them.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 27th Sunday of the Year

I want to begin with the Hebrews reading today. One of my scripture professors pointed out that the editors of our lectionary chose the day's lessons around the second reading. He stated that it frames the scriptural theme. Most of the time, if I follow his method of interpretation, it does. It did for today's. Though not mentioned specifically by name, the subject of the Hebrews reading is Jesus. Instead of reading "he" we can read Jesus.

The passage echoes the prologue to the gospel of John. God was born a human being like us in all but sin. God, in Jesus, experiences the fullness of human life, though without sin. He also suffered and died. Yet there seems to be a bit of a twist. Only God is perfect, how then can Jesus become perfect if he's already God? To become perfect, in this context, was to fulfill his mission which was to suffer, die and rise. Jesus dying saved us from sin and his rising gave us the promise of eternal life. God and humanity are united in a most intimate way because of this.

Jesus returned to the father, remains among us still and will return at the end of the age. How can Jesus be in more than one place? There are some perks to being God. With his return to the Father, he sent the Holy Spirit to guide, teach and inspire us as the Church in faith. We may feel guilt and shame for our sins, but of us, Jesus is not ashamed. He stands with us as our brother, uniting the one and entire human race as brothers and sisters with God as our father. Never before has there been such an opportunity for unity and solidarity. It is within this frame work that we can look at the other two readings.

To interpret the second chapter of Genesis proclaiming a firm separation of men and women is a mistake. Bone of bone and flesh of flesh and of one flesh implies a fundamental unity instead. Men may be from Mars and women from Venus in popular opinion but not in God's purpose.

One cannot survive without the other. We need each other to live. Becoming one flesh may be a euphemism for sexual reproduction, but the term flesh, as Hebrews uses it, implies the totality of the human person, body, mind and spirit, not just skin and carnal desire. All human beings are united having been created in the image and likeness of God. People are all made of the same stuff. Today we know it's not mud but DNA. Without the compatibility of our genes, none of us would have been born.

From our point of view, humans seem to be the pinnacle of creation and that creation itself was made just for us. In the context of this story, we are part of God's creation. What sets us apart is that we are the ones who gave names to every thing. God created and we named creation. The narrative has told us that God made Adam and the animals out of the same ground where the plants grow. All of creation is therefore related. The story has explained that humanity is made of the same bones flesh and blood.

I always like to point out something about scripture. We read the story in what seems to be real time as it happened. We are so used to the illusion of reality that movies and television produce, we can forget that the narrative of the bible is very ancient. This story is about creation not a record of God's creative act. It was first told, orally and much later written long after God created creation. Contained in the narrative are cultural and linguistic qualities of the people who told and then wrote the bible. How God created creation is not the passages true purpose. It is that all things and people have their origins in God who, aside from being love, is infinite, eternal and unconditional. Whereas the narrative is very ancient, God is always now. God's biblical name is I Am Who Am. We believe in a living God who has a long back story.

Both of these readings convey the powerful message that all creation and our salvation are the two powerful gifts from God; existence and life within God's creation and eternal life and union with God in God's kingdom. All creation has come from God and upon Jesus' return will return to God.

"What God has joined, let no one separate." These are powerful words. Yet a man and woman leave their families to start a new one. The Church of Jesus seems to have been permanently dismembered into Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Churches. People's bigotry has separated the one human race into several. Each person, though, still remains, in God's eyes, a beloved child. How can this be? Being God has its perks. Sin remains integral to human nature. When people sin, where can they go? To God for forgiveness. Except, it seems, for divorce and remarriage.

Did Jesus intend his teaching on marriage as an absolute moral law? Perhaps not. In the Orthodox Church, people can remarry after divorce. We Catholics allow it, too, after an annulment. I like to make a distinction between civil marriage and the Sacrament of Matrimony. I like to use separate terms as to avoid confusion. When someone seeks to marry within the Catholic Church in the United States, the priest has a sacramental role and a civil one. People receive the Sacrament and their marriage is registered civilly at the same time. When someone gets divorced, the civil marriage ends. The bond of the Sacrament of Matrimony still remains. Most people don't realize this. In some countries in Europe, people marry civilly and sacramentally in two separate services.

We all know that with absolution in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, God forgives people's sins. We aren't always aware of other ways. Going to mass and receiving communion grants us

God's forgiveness, as does Baptism and the Anointing of the Sick. Any of the Sacraments will forgive sin; that's their nature. Through the annulment process God forgives the sin of divorce and remarriage. God will never turn a sinner away. God seeks the reconciliation of sinners out of God's unconditional mercy.

The annulment process is to determine whether people have celebrated the Sacrament of Matrimony validly. When one receives an annulment, there was no sacramental bond. What people hear is that they were never married. Of course they were; civilly. One will not receive an annulment if there has been no divorce. In the Catholic Church, the couple, in proclaiming their consent and promising their vows, is the minister of the Sacrament of Matrimony. The priest does not "marry" them. Priests, like me, are celibate and cannot get married. Priests are never to say, although some have, "I now pronounce you..." We act as witnesses for the Church to the vows of the couple.

Often, divorce will set the parties against one another; which is often why they get divorced in the first place. In an annulment the bond of marriage is on trial, not the parties. One must prove whether or not people were able to have given consent and made vows for a permanent, loving union. Often the people who seek an annulment will report some level of healing and being able to move on. Any complaint, trouble or bad behavior by both parties is grist for the mill and can prove that they were unable to enter a true sacramental bond. This can sound like a back door and escape route. If we err, we do so with God's mercy.

In the Orthodox Churches the priest does in fact confer the Sacrament of Matrimony. If the bond comes from the Church and not the couple, that's a different situation. The church declares the bond and can break the bond if it doesn't last. Many Orthodox Christian Churches have a service in which the Church divorce takes place. They take this as a pastoral stance that the only perfect and sinless human beings were Jesus and his mother. They err toward the unlimited mercy of God.

This gospel is not just Jesus words of marriage. It ends with Jesus and children. Why? What Jesus has said about marriage and divorce is in light, not of having children but of being children. All God's children are sinners and God loves us all because of who we are, not for what we do or don't do and certainly not for who we might be. I like the words of the song, "I heard the voice of Jesus say." It goes like this: I heard the voice of Jesus say, "Come unto me and rest. Lie down thou weary one; lay down thy head upon my breast." I came to Jesus as I was so weary, worn and sad. I found in him a resting place for he has made me glad.

It is God's healing Word, Jesus that God has spoken to heal and forgive us. As God's children Jesus draws us, sinners, back to God. The gospel means good news. Despite the harshness and the limits of law, the law's source is God and God is love. God's love is infinite, eternal and unconditional. Even if the law speaks with the voice of angels, without God's love it's just noise. I worked for ten years for the Marriage Tribunal that grants annulments as a field advocate. I put together the case for the decree. I did so with the sense that even though the Church has its law and order it is always dispensed in the love of Jesus for the salvation of people and the coming of God's Kingdom. The tribunal always notified me when the annulment process was complete. None of the cases I submitted were ever denied the annulment decree.

When we face morality and what we should do we know that as humans, only Jesus and his mother never sinned. How can sinners seek God's forgiveness? Turn to Jesus any way we can;

God will never send someone who's repentant away without forgiveness. We are all God's beloved children.

May God's unconditional love continue to heal us all.

James D. Beath
October 2-3, 2021