



## 27<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR B

In the name of the Father +, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

All of us have been to weddings: they are joyful, extravagant occasions, when the whole community is encouraged to share in the joy and love of the bride and groom for one another. Everything about a wedding is special: it goes beyond the ordinary, so that the ‘specialness’ of the occasion stands out. Everyone dresses themselves up; the church is decorated in flowers; special wedding music is played; people share in a special meal at the reception, and the day may end with a dance. All of these aspects combine to make a wedding special and, hopefully, unforgettable. Of course, the cynical among us may lament the amount of money spent on weddings and all associated with them, when the figures tell us that more and more weddings are ending in divorce in our modern world. ‘What’s the point,’ we might ask, ‘paying out thousands of pounds for one day, when its all going to end in tears a few months or years afterwards?’ As I say, this is a cynical view, but even the most optimistic of us must face the fact that divorce is now commonplace, and has become so easy as to seem almost clinical in some cases.

Divorce is nothing new: we need look no further than the pages of the Old Testament to see that Moses provided means by which a man may divorce his wife. This was not a one-sided arrangement that only suited the man: it was also intended to help a woman who had a domineering husband to get out of that marriage, and it also provided for the woman, so that she was not left destitute after the divorce. As long as there has been marriage, there has been divorce, for all the reasons we know well, because even if attitudes to marriage and divorce have changed, human nature hasn’t, and human beings are as susceptible to fall into the same sins which cause a marriage to break down as they ever have been.

Jesus, too, was no stranger to divorce. In the Roman Empire, in which he lived, it was very easy to divorce, and even among the Jewish people, divorce was common. This is why the Pharisees tried to test him on the subject in today’s Gospel reading. They were trying to see whether Jesus was orthodox on the subject of divorce, as far as the Law of Moses was concerned. Of course, he was, and he referred them to the Mosaic Law when they questioned him. But, Jesus went further: the response that he gave flew in the face of the trends of the society of his day. Jesus referred his questioners further back than the Law of Moses; he said, ‘From the beginning of creation...’ Jesus referred back to that story we heard in the first reading: when man and woman were created it was intended by God that ‘a man [should] leave his father and mother and join himself to his wife, and they become one body.’ He wanted the Pharisees to understand that before the Law of Moses, when sin had come into the world and human nature, God’s ideal had been that the bond of marriage should be permanent and be the union of two bodies into one. This is the teaching that Jesus echoes and upholds in his teaching on marriage and divorce. He then goes further: ‘What God has united, man must not divide’. This flew in the face of the prevailing attitudes of his day, and, in the face of the Law of Moses as was interpreted and practised. Jesus wanted to convey the permanence of the marriage bond, and the exalted status of the vocation to marriage.

It may seem odd that an un-married, celibate priest should be talking to you about marriage, having not been married myself. But, what I place before you today is what the Church teaches about the holy estate of matrimony, based on the teaching and example of Our Lord.

Marriage is a Sacrament: an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace that is worked out in the lives of the couple throughout their earthly lives together. It is a bond that grows stronger over time, and it is the sacramental grace that the couple receive from God that is intended to help them overcome their difficulties, and to grow in love for each other and for God. Marriage is, also, a vocation: it is a calling that Jesus hallowed by his presence at the wedding in Cana, and it is a calling, which those who embrace it must treat with the utmost seriousness and respect. It was the seriousness of the calling to marriage that Jesus was trying to make the Pharisees understand.

One of the most important points about marriage is that it is not just an activity between two people: it involves the whole community; that is why the marriage ceremony is such a public and special event. I know that in many cultures a marriage involves the families meeting and getting to know each other, involving the exchange of gifts and dowries: in these situations the marriage not only belongs to the couple concerned but to two families, who gain a new daughter and a new son. In these communities marriage breakdown is often less frequent because the couple have that added support of the families being united as well. So, marriage is a social activity, and cannot be carried out alone. It is, as the Marriage service says, for the mutual up-building of society, and the ideal relationship in which children are born and raised.

Of course, when we attend a wedding we are joyful for the couple who are being married; we share their hopes and their joy, and we pray that their lives may be ones of happiness, and that their marriage will only come to an end in this life through death. We know what the ideals that the Church sets before us are, but we also know that we live in the real world, and that marriages don't always work out, and end in divorce. We must be realistic about this, even though we preach and try to uphold the ideal that Jesus set before the Pharisees, and which he sets before us.

All of us are sinful, and our human sinfulness enters into our relationships with our fellow human beings. We are all, to an extent, selfish, unwilling to compromise, stubborn, hard of heart: we all fall short of S. Paul's famous list of the attributes of what love should be in 1 Corinthians 13. We know that, sadly, many marriages are very unhappy relationships for many people to be in, not only for the couple involved, but also for their children and their wider families. Just because God created marriage as an ideal, he didn't magically preserve it from human sinfulness and frailty. And when we preach and teach about marriage, all of us must recognise that failure for human beings to live up to the ideals of marriage and married life, are part and parcel of the whole that is sinful human nature. This means that we must never be judgemental of those whose marriages have failed, as Our Lord did not judge the woman caught in adultery; we must try to be compassionate, and to help those who are caught up in all the pain, confusion and fear that divorce involves to get back on their feet; we must have a special care for the children who may be victims of a divorce or a relationship breakdown, for, as Jesus took care of the little children and did not send them away, so must we.

Divorce and the breakdown of any relationship affects many people: the couple, their children, their families, and the community in which they live, and it is, ultimately, a consequence of human sin. But, to those who are divorced, or are going through the breakdown of a relationship, we must offer nothing but our compassion, our support and our prayers: we must never be judgmental or take sides. Thankfully, those whose marriages break down are no longer treated as if they were outcasts, as they were in times past. What we must offer is a Christian response to the problem of divorce and relationship breakdown,

and we do that by following the teaching and example of our Lord: we must love those involved with a Christ-like love and compassion, while upholding the Church's teaching on divorce. This is a very thin tightrope to walk, and we can only do it by remembering that we are all sinners, in need of God's grace, mercy, forgiveness and healing touch. Let us remember Christ's own words, 'What God has united, man must not divide'; but only as we remember his solemn warning to us all, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged.'

Amen.