27th Sunday in OT 2024

Today, it seems that in many public discussions on religion, particularly regarding Catholicism, only the so-called “hot button issues”, which relate mostly to human sexuality, are considered relevant. Most of our public commentators appear to feel the least that could be expected of the Catholic Church, in a progressive, in other words liberal, society, is that it would cease to behave like a troglodyte. Of course, we recognise that these “hot button issues” concern many Catholics, as well as their families, and are increasingly the topic of conversation in parish meetings, and other social gatherings. These issues are significant in the life of the Church, and they need to be discussed and examined, not merely, however, for the sake of progress, but in the context of seeking the truth – “what does it mean to be human?; how can humanity flourish?; how are we to know and understand God’s will?”

“Hot button issues” are not the invention of modern society, as we discover in today’s Gospel passage: *“Some Pharisees approached Jesus and asked, ‘Is it against the law for a man to divorce his wife?’”*  The question was, and continues to be, controversial, but in the particular context of first century Galilee, it had a further depth and intensity – just a short time before, John the Baptist had been beheaded because of his opposition to Herod’s divorce and his subsequent remarriage to his brother’s wife; *“For John had told Herod, ‘It is against the law for you to have your brother’s wife’”.* The Pharisees were attempting to draw Jesus into an area which was not only controversial, but also deadly dangerous – Herod, and his new wife, were more than just sensitive about comments regarding their liaison!

In spite of that, Jesus did not shy away from the Pharisees’ question, rather he responded by going beyond the narrowness of their question, and in doing so, revealed the divine will of God – as it was *“from the beginning”*. He teaches clearly that marriage is an indissoluble union; *“the two become one body”*, and states, *“What God has united no one must divide.”* The Church, therefore, can do no other than uphold the ideal of Christian marriage as an indissoluble union.

The marriage bond is created when a single man and a single woman freely choose to seal their love for one another in a committed relationship, and it is further enriched, like water become wine, *(cf Jn2:1-13)*, when understood and accepted as the fulfilment and manifestation of God’s will for the couple – this is beautifully summed up in that old saying, “your marriage is made in heaven”! The permanence of marriage is not merely based on the strength of the couple’s commitment to one another, but on the acceptance that such a commitment is the will of God, and thus is blessed by God.

Because marriage is a real sharing in God’s divine plan we call it a sacrament – therefore, it is not a mere a social convention that can be changed, or redefined, to suit the mores of our times. Someone has rightfully said, “The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it”! *(Flannery O'Connor).* We base our understanding of marriage, not on opinion polls, political debate, or media campaigns, but on the word of Jesus Christ - *“Your word is truth, O Lord, consecrate us in truth.” (Jn. 17:17).*

However, as discerning persons, we know only too well, that when our Christian ideals, including the ideal of Christian marriage, rubs up against sinful human nature, the complexity caused can be more than humanly challenging. Sadly, in certain situations the marriage ideal, as presented by Jesus, may become impossible for some; for example, when there is “abuse and violence, humiliation and exploitation, disregard and indifference” *(cf AL 241),* andbetrayal*,* separation may be inevitable, and even necessary. While this may be so, it is also important to keep in mind that a separated, or divorced, person is free to receive Holy Communion, and such a person, provided there is no other impediment, should be encouraged to do so. For some in more complex situations, perhaps all we can do is to encourage them to continue to respect and value the ideal of marriage, even when it is not possible for them to live it to the full. Although, having said that, sometimes it may be possible to make a pastoral accommodation, which may, to some extent, ameliorate their situation. However, such exceptions cannot ever form the foundation or vision of Christian marriage.

Remembering that we are all sinners, let us be certain of this: the Lord Jesus, never turns away from anyone – whatever the situation. As a Catholic Christian community, we must ensure that no one feels judged; that no one feels marginalised, and no one is excluded. There are two temptations we must avoid: espousing a superficial notion of “modernization” by conformity to the secular “spirit of the age” in which all relative; the other is by becoming the spiritual heirs of the Pharisees, those enemies of Jesus, by adopting a spiritual and moral rigidity. We must always avoid judgements which do not take account of the complexity of people’s situations*.* Jesus said, *“Judge not and you shall not be judged” (Mt.7:1; Lk.6:36).*

*“Lord Jesus,*

*give us the wisdom and the generosity*

*to build a compassionate society*

*that cares for your children.”*  **Amen**