

Sunday Homily

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

3 OCTOBER 2021

YEAR B

"So they are no longer two, but one flesh.
Therefore what God has joined together,
let no one separate."

Mark 10:8-9

Illustration

Rabbi Lionel Blue, the well-known British religious writer and broadcaster, commented that honesty is essential if morality is not to become mere moralising. The assertion is true and the distinction is an important one. Morality seeks to discern what is right and what is wrong and to live by what we find to be the truth. It is a way of finding freedom, for ourselves and others.

In contrast, moralising is about judging others' behaviour and seeking to impose our moral values on them while sometimes exempting ourselves from our own moral legislation. It is generally an attempt to limit others, either because we can, which becomes a crude exertion of power over them; or because in seeking to limit them we are recognising that we ourselves are not free. It is difficult for some people to watch others fly in freedom when they have neither the will nor the courage to do so.

Introducing honesty into the equation enables us to examine our motives, something the Pharisees were not very good at. But moralising and legalism make cosy bedfellows. They produce a blanket of security for people who never take risks with imagination or life. It is easy to forget that laws are made for the people's guidance, protection and well-being, not to trip them up, especially those given by God to his well-loved children.

Gospel Teaching

The Pharisees were not primarily interested in the question of divorce. Their main purpose was to test Jesus, to catch him out, to see if he was prepared to acknowledge the Mosaic Law as they themselves taught it. Their question was an attempt to find a weapon which they could use against him.

The divorce law as it stood then sought to moralise. It laid down firm rules but was very one-sided in favour of men who could put away women at will, leaving them destitute.

Jesus was fully aware of the Pharisees' intentions. But as he had done before, Jesus turned their trickery into an opportunity to teach them and us a moral

truth. In describing the unity of both partners becoming one flesh he is implying that they are not just indivisible as human beings but that they are to be equal in their treatment of each other, and their union is to be similarly respected by the outside world. There is not to be one set of rights for men and another for women. God made them, joined them and loves them equally. This is a model for vowed relationships.

Jesus was overwhelmingly concerned about justice, especially in relationships. Women and children in his day came low on the status ratings. Yet, following his teaching on marriage, he sternly ordered that the little children should not be prevented from equal status with adults in their right to approach him. He even chooses them as the model of perfection needed by adults to achieve heaven. So, in one short exchange, he diplomatically handles the Pharisees, then highlights and raises up the status of ordinary men, women and children to take their rightful place as equals, in society, under the moral law, as properly befits a people made by God.

Application

This attitude of Jesus' is extremely important for us today in a world which places a greater emphasis upon what people produce than on their intrinsic worth. It is a foundation stone of his moral teaching about justice in relationships, not just marriage, but amongst neighbours, in communities, in the Church, between nations.

Jesus wants people to be free, not to condemn them. Free people are people with a purpose, moving forward in life and relationships, keen to grow, to change, to live in a constant state of becoming more authentically who God made them to be.

Most importantly, people who themselves live with a sense of God-given freedom are far more likely to help to free others. Free people are happy people and happy people are far better able to do God's will with quiet determination and a light heart. But freedom can be a hard road, much harder than the security of legalism and moralising. Jesus' teaching gives us the tools for the job and a yardstick by which to measure our natural responses to life's questions. Its essence is clear-sighted honesty. Honesty is the key to morality. Rabbi Blue, that other Jewish teacher, is right!