

Homily, 29 January 2012

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time *(cycle B)*

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 95:1-2,6-7,7-9; 1 Corinthians 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28



As you may imagine, my homily preparation begins with several quiet readings of the texts and perhaps several days of mulling them over. I wait for something to catch my attention. What I really hope, is that the Holy Spirit will give me a 'dope slap' and say – "*Hey! ... read that part again, it's right there.*"

The reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians seemed rather challenging, not one that most people would like, but one that could use some explanation. Yet was that really what I wanted to discuss? I asked Janet what she thought. She looked at me for a moment. "*You want to talk about how it's better not to be married?*" That was all she said.

Well last weekend we were watching the Sound of Music. I'm not really sure why, I just selected it at random. Right in the middle of the film, when Maria has fled back to the Abby because she is afraid that she is falling in love with the captain, comes her conversation with the Reverend Mother. She tells Maria: "*Maria, the love of a man and woman is holy too, ... if you love this man, it doesn't mean you love God less.*" It's funny when and where you hear the Holy Spirit. ... So ... Paul it is.



For the last three Sundays, we have been reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The texts have been read in order, but with several sections omitted in order to focus on a theme. Now the theme has not been marriage, but being prepared for the coming of the Lord, which Paul seems to have expected during his lifetime. So what we read today, is rather out of context if you don't know the letter well.

Paul was not anti-marriage nor did he necessarily think that celibacy was better than marriage. Tradition has it that Paul was a widower, so he knew both sides of the issue.

The sequence of readings skips over several verses in including chapter seven, verses 1-14. In those passages Paul begins:

*“Now in regard to the matters about which you wrote ...’
Then he quotes what he has heard: ‘It is a good thing for a man
not to touch a woman, ...’”*

Paul understood that some of the Corinthians had adopted celibacy as an ascetic practice, which is commendable -- but not for married couples. He was very gently trying to correct them:

Paul went on to write:

“The husband should fulfill his duty toward his wife, and likewise the wife toward her husband. A wife does not have authority over her own body, but rather her husband, and similarly a husband does not have authority over his own body, but rather his wife. Do not deprive each other, except perhaps by mutual consent for a time, to be free for prayer, but then return to one another ... This I say by way of concession, however, not as a command.”

In other words, there is no requirement for such asceticism in marriage, although he concedes that on occasion it might be appropriate for short periods.

He goes on:

“Indeed, I wish everyone to be as I am, but each has a particular gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.”

Paul believed that both marriage and celibacy were gifts from God. When God offers us gifts, sometimes we have to choose the one that best suits us. That is all Paul is trying to say.

And if you aren't yet convinced about Paul's real understanding of marriage as a gift from God, keep reading:

“... if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she is willing to go on living with him, he should not divorce her; and if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he is willing to go on living with her, she should not divorce her

husband. For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, whereas in fact they are holy."

The sacramental grace of marriage transcends the individual and transforms the entire marriage. It forms the foundation of the domestic church.



What Paul said two thousand years ago, and what Church says today, hasn't changed:

God himself is the author of marriage, writes the Church in the Catechism. Marriage is not a purely human institution despite the many variations it may have undergone through the centuries ... These differences should not cause us to forget its common and permanent characteristics.

The first sin of Adam and Eve was a break with God, and consequently of their own communion as man and woman. Their relations were distorted by mutual recriminations, and the beautiful vocation of man and woman to be fruitful, multiply, and subdue the earth was burdened by the pain of childbirth and the toil of work.

After the fall, the grace we receive in marriage helps us to overcome our self-absorption and egoism, and it disposes us the care of others, to mutual aid and to self-giving.

From the beginning marriage has been ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of children. This covenant, when made between a baptized man and woman, has been raised by Jesus to the dignity of a sacrament.



In our times, the institution of marriage has been battered: sometimes directly, sometimes as an unintended consequence of the changes in our culture. Marriage rates have fallen to an all time low. Out-of-wedlock births have soared. And family life in many communities has fallen apart, particularly among the poor. This is bad for our country. It is bad for us.

Now, there are many people in our country who want to redefine marriage. Most often we hear about legitimizing same-sex marriage, but there are also murmurs about changing the laws on polygamy and of redefining marriage to be a more open relationship.

Many people who want these changes believe they are needed: to give legitimacy to some kinds of relationships, to let people choose their own path to happiness.

What happens if marriage is redefined: if procreation and childrearing are simply no longer meaningful as an integral part of marriage, if fidelity and monogamy are brushed aside?

Many sociologists are beginning to see that the decline of marriage is not just a consequence of poverty, but also a cause of poverty and many other social ills.

People advocating non-traditional marriages often ask those who oppose them: "How will my non-traditional marriage affect yours?"

The immediate answer, of course, is that it won't. But it will undoubtedly affect the marriages of generations to come, that is, if marriage has any meaning for them at all.

But of course, there will also be those who do live according to the natural law and follow the way of Lord. In season and out, some men and women will always fall in love and raise families together. Love and hope will not fail.

But we have to look out for the common good, so our task in these troubled times, when the status of marriage is but one of many serious issues that confront us, is to emulate Paul: proclaim the simple truth as best we can.

Don't be afraid to speak out on marriage and other serious issues. Talk about them around the diner table, at lunch with your friends and colleagues, ... and make your voice heard in this election year.

"Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel," said Paul.
Woe to us, if we do not speak out.

Walk with Paul in the way of Christ. Listen to his counsel and act on what he says. He is both wise and holy, and a good guide for us all.