

"Jesus on Marriage and Divorce"

Homily of October 5, 2003

by Fr. Gerry Murphy

I look at the readings. I pause. I sigh deeply and say to myself: "Oh My God! Why did I get this Sunday to preach?" Then I decide, "O.K. there's only one thing I can do here." And so, I dim the lights, light my candle, burn my Asian pine incense, tumble into deep meditation and have the following conversation with Jesus:

- Jesus, are you there? I need your help again.

- Of course I am here, Jesus replied. I am always with you. What can I help you with?

- Well, it's just that I'm not all that sure what next Sunday's gospel is about. I know it deals with marriage, divorce, remarriage and adultery. But I'm somewhat confused.

- What exactly do you wish me to explain? Jesus calmly responded.

- O.K. for starters, I began, how was marriage and divorce understood and practiced in the ancient Jewish world?

- Well, Jesus replied, the ancient Jewish world was an extremely patriarchal and male-dominated society. Women had no rights and all the power belonged to the husbands. They could pretty much do what they pleased with impunity. And that really bugged me.

- So, I asked, what was the practice with regard to divorce?

- Well, a man could divorce his wife for little or no reason.

- Can you give me an example?

- Yes, if a husband noticed that his meals were regularly unappetizing, or that his wife was less attractive than another woman, respected legal authorities told him that he could divorce her. Even bad breath, unkempt hair, or noisy talk in the house that could be heard by the neighbors, counted as valid grounds for divorce.

- You're kidding me, Jesus. And what about the teaching on adultery? What did the ancient Jewish law say about that?

- Adultery, Jesus responded, for the Jews, consisted in infringing the husband's (never the wife's)

property rights, his rights over his wife. A husband could have as many affairs with unmarried women as he liked without committing adultery. And, if he slept with a married woman, that was adulterous not because it was a wrongful infringement of his married relationship, but because it infringed the property rights of his mistress's husband!

- Wow! That's incredible, Jesus, I said. And how did you deal with these bizarre laws?

- Well, Jesus replied, I consistently challenged such a liberal understanding of divorce and asserted the lifelong commitment of marriage.

- Yes, but you say in Mark's gospel, and I quote you: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." Now isn't that a little harsh, Jesus? I mean, are you saying that a couple who are in a bad marriage must either stay married for the rest of their lives or remain single if they choose to get a divorce?

- No, I'm not saying that at all, Jesus replied. That is to take my teaching in a very literal sense. I simply mean that couples should take the lifelong communion of marriage seriously, and not abandon this sacred covenant quite so easily as some of them do. I fully accept that many marriages, in spite of the couple's honest efforts, do not attain the ideal your church has of marriage. And if that is that case, so be it. Such couples should be free to move on with their lives.

- Thank you, Jesus. That is a good answer. And what would you say is needed for a marriage to flourish and endure in today's world?

- For any marriage to last, Jesus replied, the following components need to be present: deep mutual respect, a gentleness between the couple, uncompromising fidelity to each other, harmony of thought and feelings on important matters, a healthy sense of humor, regular prayer together, and total trust in each other.

- In a word, Jesus continued, couples need to be true soul mates and moral companions. They need to remember that they do not belong to each other, but rather they belong with each other. And they need to keep God at the center of their conjugal love.

- Jesus, may I ask you one more question?

- By all means, Jesus replied, what else can I help you with?

- Well, it's just that there's all this talk these days about same sex unions and arguments over legalizing gay marriages etc. Where do you stand on all of this?

Jesus paused for the longest time. I waited and waited, and then he spoke to me in a clear and deliberate tone:

- My friend, God ordained that marriage should be between a man and a woman who clearly complement each other sexually, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. Therefore a same sex union can never be a true marriage. That said, I do not judge or condemn anyone who loves another, and seeks another's love in the only way they know how.

- Thank you so much, Jesus, for coming to my rescue once again.

- You are most welcome my friend. But can I tell you something?

- Of course.

- You need to get rid of that Asian pine incense. It's wafting up here into heaven and the angels are choking on it!

- Will do, Jesus. Good night.