



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B

The family - a factory of hope, of life, of resurrection

Readings: Genesis 2: 18-24, Ps 127, Hebrews 2: 9-11, Mark 10: 2-16

When you look at religious history for guidance on the expected normalities of married family life, the immediate pickings are a bit thin. Jesus Himself never married. Moses married in exile, divorced the mother of his children and then fell out with his outraged sister when he married a black woman. The Buddha married and had a son but was an almost entirely absentee father as he hit the road begging and seeking enlightenment. Mohammed married a dozen women, including a nine year old, the wife of a relative and the widows of men he had killed. So we don't get much immediate help there.

For Christians we look to the Holy Family for inspiration but that is, by its very nature, an unusual arrangement.

We have been brought up in the fading western empire of Christian culture which has always put a high value on marriage and family. But we have also lived through a time of crisis in marriage that is unprecedented. In 1901 there were under 600 divorces in England and Wales.

In 2012 there were 118,000 and even that is well down on the peaks of the eighties and nineties. It has, in all probability, only declined because fewer people are currently 'taking the plunge' (the current success rate of which is just over 50 %).

The huge societal changes and seismic legal shifts have led to a crisis of family life with huge fallout for all of us.

There are whole subcultures where feral fathers are absent and irresponsible. Post-feminist culture regards chastity among young women as a ridiculous novelty. There is considerably more pre-marital sex than post-marital.

So today's readings give us a real chance to go back behind the mess and confusion that we, as fallen human beings, have made of it to the very origins of the gift and the purposes of God in the nature of our creation. First of all we should note, from the Genesis account, that the relationship between Man and Woman is pre-lapsarian – that is that it occurs before the Fall. Man, conscious of his aloneness in his unique creatureliness, longs with all his heart for companionship. There is his relationship with creation, as steward, and his relationship with his creator whose image he carries. But there is no relation that is like or equal or complementary. There is a natural, good and proper longing for the other, without which he struggles to be fulfilled or complete. God recognises this desire as part of what He himself has created and is, therefore, good and so God responds with the gift of Woman. (Always remember that the Creation accounts do not deal with the natural science of our biology but rather the cosmology of the heart and the mystery of Man's origin in God and his destiny in eternity.)

The gift of woman, contrary to the modern materialistic and atheistic nostrums, is not an interchangeable identity. They are not men with modified plumbing. Woman is integral to the nature of Man, drawn from the common humanity, equal in reflecting the divine image, separate in purpose with charisms that make Man into humanity. The longing of the heart of Man for this sacramental partnership is born both of self-knowledge and the knowledge of God. Not everyone is called to marriage but it is a fundamental sign of the purposes of God in creation.

Not everyone succeeds in marriage but the truth is that none of us set out to fail and our best efforts have been towards recognising and dignifying that gift even where we ourselves have strayed or been abandoned.

The Church therefore takes the highest view of marriage.

It is unitive and creative. It brings us together in a mystery that Holy Scripture describes as 'becoming one flesh' and it is the place of participation in creation as pro-creators (acting on behalf of God).

It is intimate and sacrificial. It is a lifelong journey into the heart of the other. It forms a sacramental bond that is part of a vocation to holiness. It is a place of love and self-giving. Marriage is the metaphor that God employs to describe His relationship to His people in Hosea. It is the image that St. Paul uses to describe Christ's relationship to His Church in Ephesians 5. Just as God Himself is relational in His nature in the Trinity, so Man, Woman and their offspring, reflect that divine relational image of love in their wedding and in the marriage that flows from that solemn sacramentum. It is why Jesus speaks as powerfully as He does in this morning's Gospel in defence of marriage. It is why Mother Church will travel every road with her children who have been torn by separation or abandonment to understand if the marriage was valid or should be annulled but cannot accept the secular legal disposal of the sacrament.

'Marriage is indissoluble when it is a sacrament. And this the Church cannot change. It's doctrine. It's an indissoluble sacrament.' Pope Francis in his recent in-flight interview on leaving USA.

Today, in Rome, the Holy Father will open the decisive session of the Synod that he has called on the Family and Evangelisation. Please note that it is called, **'The vocation and mission of the family in the church and the modern world.'** Pope Francis has described the family as 'a factory of hope, of life, of resurrection.'

That's a big claim but it's what the Church has always believed and why she nurtures and defends her children in the celebration of this sacred gift and this fountainhead of the future of Man. Pray for the Pope. Pray for the Synod. Pray for the family of the Church and pray for all those that God has given you, as family, to love and serve in this life.

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