

## **From The Pastor**

Everything has a context. Things have different meanings in different settings. Very often it is not what is said, but how it is said. Tone of voice, disposition, and context will give more influence to words spoken than to the words themselves. This is the case today in the gospel.

Jesus is well aware of the animosity between himself and the Pharisees. He readily understands the hypocrisy of their questioning. The criticism and judgment hidden underneath their question is hardly subtle. There was a common understanding and acceptance of divorce at the time of Jesus as it was presented in the Law of Moses. In reality, neither the question, nor the reading is about divorce. The Pharisees don't care what Jesus thinks about divorce. They are going to act and behave as they wish anyway. Their motivation is to trip up Jesus and discredit his name.

Knowing the context of the question and the motivation of those who present it, Jesus does not directly answer the question. Pastorally, humanly, spiritually, and in every other way, Jesus knows the pain and separation that divorce causes. The response Jesus gives invites us to a much higher plane of understanding regarding God and the nature of marriage.

Jesus admits the writing of divorce in the Mosaic Law, but makes it clear that such a decree reflects the limitation of our human condition, yet it is not part of the divine order. This is where we go to the higher plane and the context out of which Jesus gives his answer.

In the perfect ideal, Jesus and all Christian theology see marriage as a symbol of the union between God and us. The divine union between God and us is permanent and faithful through the person of Jesus. God is passionate to be in relationship with us. We are made for relationship with God and one another. This is the connection with the first reading: 'it is not good for the man to be alone'. We are social beings who need to be bonded and belonging to one another, in and through the One who created us. This bonding is realized in the communion of marriage when a man and a woman share an intimacy that encompasses all of their being; so intimate that 'the two shall become one flesh'. The emphasis is on the sharing of souls, the inner self, which is then naturally and wonderfully reflected in the union of bodies.

Jesus is challenging his detractors beyond the black and white correctness of the law to a higher spiritual understanding of the bonds of human and divine love. More than moral rightness, Jesus is teaching them the intimate union God has made with us through Christ. Christ is our marriage, our communion, our permanent bond with the Father that can never be broken. This is the union that God desired and accomplished in the Lord Jesus. The divine marriage between God and His creation is complete, now symbolized in Christ as bride of the Church, and in the sacrament of Christian marriage. So dignified are we, that our love for one another, especially and uniquely in marriage is a reflection of the divine marriage between God and ourselves in Christ.

This is what we strive for, and in fact what every human heart longs for in love. No one goes into marriage expecting division or separation. No one wants such a thing, and most work to avoid such a trauma. None the less, we are all well aware of the pains of divorce. Very few of us have not been touched in one way or another by this painful reality. Too often, people who live with the burden of divorce tend to distance themselves from God and the Church out of a sense of guilt or unworthiness. This is NOT the case. You are welcome and worthy. Your pain is God's pain, and in the divine will you shall not be separated from us. You belong and we invite your active participation.

Many divorced people believe they cannot receive communion. This is not the case. A divorced person in good standing who has not remarried is most welcome to the sacraments. For those who are divorced and remarried the Church asks you to resolve/reconcile the previous marriage before receiving communion. Resolution is done through an annulment or other appropriate process. Why? The Church honors all marriage as sacred and permanent. Any marriage is sacramentally valid until otherwise resolved. A second sacramental marriage cannot be entered while a first bond is still intact.

I share these points as a matter of pastoral concern. I am most willing to assist anyone in the annulment process. For those divorced and not remarried, you are most welcome and invited. Come join with us. God loves and welcomes you in the divine marriage and communion of redemption accomplished in Christ. Humanly, we all share and experience the pains of separation and wounded love. Let us all then be instruments of welcome and unity for one another. In so doing, we are sharing in the work of building the Kingdom of God, where one day we will know our fullness in the Lord Jesus in communion with the Father.

Father John Esper