

Twenty-seventh Sunday – October 4, 2015

Today's gospel might tempt a preacher to call in sick. The topic of divorce was a contentious issue even in Jesus' day. As an acknowledged teacher and spiritual master, Jesus was often asked his opinion on significant issues. He knew, of course, that marriage was held in high esteem among the Jews. He also knew that rabbis of the time held differing views about divorce. Some rabbis limited the reason for divorce to adultery; others permitted divorce for something as insignificant as a badly cooked meal! Notice, too, that very often women and children were left out of any of these debates. There was usually no way for a wife to divorce her husband at that time.

Jesus was not interested in splitting hairs or in silly debates. He is interested in retrieving God's original plan for marriage: a life-long union between a man and a woman given by God for the mutual good of the couple and for the procreation and education of children.

"What God has joined together, no one must divide." In summary, the loving communion of a man and a woman in marriage is meant to be faithful, fruitful, and life-long. This much is true; it was true from the beginning; it is true now.

And yet, we know, don't we, that divorce is widespread. All kinds of pressures – from society, culture and the economy – take their toll on marriage and family life. Many families around the globe are faced with grave problems like homelessness, lack of food and safe drinking water, war and senseless violence, forced migration and so on. Internal issues such as physical and mental health add to the mountain of stresses of spouses and parents.

The Synod on the Family, now beginning in Rome, wants to be of service to marriage and the family. The issues are many. The solutions not so clear. Practical forms of accompaniment for real-life situations present deep challenges for the whole Church. We can't escape these challenges and look for an off-ramp. We can't suggest simplistically that times have changed and gospel challenges from Jesus must be more symbolic than real.

The ideals of a lifelong marriage and a stable family that are held up to us in the readings today are still valid. But we humans struggle and sometimes limp along to reach those ideals. We are limited and frail. After all, who of us can live up to the ideal of the Beatitudes day in and day out? And so, we rely on God's understanding and mercy. We also need to offer each other support and hope. We are all in this together.