

ORDINARY SUNDAY 27 YEAR B 2009

In the name....

One day, while a woodcutter was cutting a branch of a tree above a river, his axe fell into the river. When he cried out, the Lord appeared and asked, "Why are you crying?" The woodcutter replied that his axe had fallen into water, and he needed the axe to make his living. The Lord went down into the water and reappeared with a golden axe. "Is this your axe?" the Lord asked. The woodcutter replied, "No." The Lord again went down and came up with a silver axe. "Is this your axe?" the Lord asked. Again, the woodcutter replied, "No." The Lord went down again and came up with an iron axe. "Is this your axe?" the Lord asked. The woodcutter replied, "Yes." The Lord was pleased with the man's honesty and gave him all three axes to keep, and the woodcutter went home happy.

Some time later the woodcutter was walking with his wife along the riverbank, and his wife fell into the river. When he cried out, the Lord again appeared and asked him, "Why are you crying?" "Oh Lord, my wife has fallen into the water!" The Lord went down into the water and came up with Jennifer Lopez. "Is this your wife?" the Lord asked.

"Yes," cried the woodcutter. The Lord was furious. "You lied! That is an untruth!" The woodcutter replied, "Oh, forgive me, my Lord. It is a misunderstanding. You see, if I had said 'no' to Jennifer Lopez, You would have come up with Catherine Zeta-Jones. Then if I also said 'no' to her, You would have come up with my wife. Had I then said 'yes', you would have given all three to me. Lord, I am a poor man, and I am not able to take care of all three wives, so THAT'S why I said 'yes' to Jennifer Lopez." The moral of this story is for the ladies in the house: whenever a

man lies, it's always for a good and honourable reason, and for the benefit of others.

I thought I would start with some humour this mornings as the sermons for the last few weeks have all be so serious and today's gospel reading on divorce is also a very difficult and serious one, one which most clergy avoid preaching on..

As I am sure you are aware there are many streams of thought in relations to the issue of divorce in the Church.

One group holds the opinion that Jesus said no divorce was possible, as it seems to say in our reading today.

Others argue that in Matthew divorce is allowed but only on the grounds of adultery.

Others again argue that the Church must face up to the reality of life, that at times marriages do fail for many different reasons and though this is not a happy state of affairs, the Church must recognize the pastoral reality of the situation.

I clearly belong to the third group. We as the Church are people who proclaim a new life a new start just as we proclaim forgiveness. How can we offer this to everyone and be able to welcome all people to come and join us, then put up our hand and say, but don't expect us to accept your divorce or remarriage or do as some other churches do, refuse to allow divorced people to become full members of the church or even refuse to give them communion.

This seems to go against the whole teaching of Jesus who welcomed those who were outcast from the Judaism of his time.

As with most contentious issues in the life of the Church the answer is never simple.

As I see it the problem often arises when people try to read the scriptures in black and white, as though the Bible was written by the hand of God, just yesterday.

Only a few days ago I was sitting in my office and read this passage from the letter of Paul to Timothy:

I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

I think we, as people, and as a Church have come along way from the time in which Paul wrote. If we are going to start to insist on literal translation and application of particular texts in the Bible then we must apply all. In the passage I just read, Paul in fact is very moderate compared to some of the sections of the Book Leviticus in the OT, for example.

All of these passages must be read and understood in their cultural context, and cannot simply be applied *ad hoc* to today.

I prefer to see the work of the Church today as being to discern the truth among the gray areas, which is a far more difficult thing to do. This often requires much more thinking and soul searching.

Simplistic solutions frequently lead to people being hurt and then walking away from the Church.

Today in the gospel reading, Jesus is confronted by a group of people who saw the Law, the Jewish law, in terms of black and white, the Pharisees.

The Pharisees tried to use the law to trap Jesus. They asked Jesus if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. (divorce for women was not possible)

I should say that in the time of Jesus, issues about divorce were no clearer than they are today. Within Judaism there were two different groups. One argued that a man could put away his wife only for a serious misdemeanour, such as adultery. The other group argued that man could divorce his wife for any good reason.

Jesus cuts through both of these arguments by referring the Pharisees back to what Moses taught them. They answered, Moses allowed us to write a writ of divorce, and Jesus replied, this was only because of your hardness of heart.

He then takes the Pharisees back a step further to the time of creation.(our first reading for today). He said, But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.'

Jesus is no longer speaking about the issue of divorce, but is speaking about the relationship of male and female in marriage. They are equal partners in relationship, not as the Pharisees thought. This is further emphasized when he spoke to his disciples in private. He says whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another commits adultery.

This was quite contrary to the Pharisaic understanding, which always made the woman the adulterer and only allowed men to apply for a divorce.

Clearly Jesus is teaching about the equality of men and women in relationships that one was not the property of the other and marriages were not to be dissolved at the whim of either party. Rather marriage is a gift from God so that a couple may share their life together in equality.

But we do not live in a perfect world. We live in a very stressful world with people who are imperfect, as we ourselves are imperfect. In many ways the strains and stresses, the temptations and the hardness of heart, have almost made the kind of relationship spoken of in the scriptures an impossible dream.

Therefore the role of the church is not to push away those who for whatever reason have failed to live up to the hopes they had originally aspired to, but rather if they were party to the failure and that failure is acknowledged and confessed, we must offer reconciliation and forgiveness. If they were a victim in some way, then we must offer support.

What we must never do is to pronounce judgment, that is not our role and if we do we seriously run the risk of becoming just like the Pharisees.

The role of the Church is to be a vehicle of God's grace, offering forgiveness, bringing about reconciliation and not a court of judgment.