

Twenty seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

I called to see my Uncle Arthur and Aunty Audrie the other day. My Uncle Arthur will celebrate his 98th birthday in ten days time. My Uncle and Aunt are in their 75th. year of married life. Both were in the armed forces when they met towards the end of the second world war. They celebrated their marriage only eight weeks after they had met. My aunt quickly reminded me that they were married in January and their son was born in December. For the last 3679 weeks they have been living their married life as best they could, continually growing in their love for one another. Their faith has been important for them and until recently each Sunday they would attend their local Uniting Church together. My Uncle laments that his wife is not well enough to go with him now. Knowing them says something very beautiful about marriage and about the grace and the commitment it takes to live it well.

We have just heard Jesus say something very important about marriage in today's gospel. He is drawn into the controversy about divorce when he was asked, "Is it against the law for a man to divorce his wife?" Those Pharisees were trying to set a trap for him. They knew that it was not against the law. It was common practice for a Jewish man to divorce his wife. The arguments were more about what constituted sufficient reason to divorce her. Some said it could only if there had been sexual misconduct on the part of the wife. But for others, if she spoiled a dish for him or he had found someone more beautiful, that was reason enough for a man to divorce his wife.

Jesus takes a much stricter view about divorce than almost all of his contemporaries. When he was told that Moses allowed a man to write up a decree of divorce for his wife, Jesus described that as a concession to human weakness. The decree of divorce was some protection for the woman. It made clear that her former husband no longer had any rights over her. She was free to marry again. But Jesus tells his hearers, "It was because you were so unteachable that he wrote this commandment for you." Jesus then draws together two verses from the two creation stories that we find in the Book of Genesis. For Jesus these express God's original plan for men and women. "But from the beginning God made them male and female. This is why a man must leave father and mother, and the two become one body. They are no longer two, but one body. So then, what God has united, man must not divide." I must admit that I always change that last sentence as it is used in the marriage ritual to make it more inclusive. But it seems that Jesus is making the point that a man, a husband, must not divide what God has united.

When Jesus privately expands on what he had said in public, he speaks against divorce whether it has been initiated by a man or a woman. In the context of his time and right up to today, Jesus teaching on marriage and divorce is radical. That it was so hard for the first Christians to accept and live the ideal that Jesus puts before them can be seen by the exceptions to the rule about no divorce that are already there in the other gospels and in the letters of St. Paul.

The ideal that Jesus puts before us for marriage to be a lifelong union between a man and a woman that reflects and makes present the love that our God has each of us, needs to be seen as an ideal that we strive for. Jesus' attitude to divorce needs to be seen in the context of his own pastoral practice. When we listen to how he related to the woman at the well, or to the one who poured oil over his feet and washed them with her tears, we see that Jesus finds a special place in his heart for those who cannot live up to the ideals that he teaches.

The Church continues to try to combine presenting the ideal and dealing with the reality of marriage and divorce. Many people who have experienced the pain of marriage break down would say that we haven't done it well. How many people do we know who would still be here celebrating Eucharist with us if they had not experienced marriage breakdown? For some the marriage annulment process has been a very difficult but beautiful healing process. But for others, even the thought of it is too hard. The annulment process has been simplified recently and judgements can be made about nullity much more quickly now. Most annulments will be judged in less than six months.

Today we can thank God for the gift of marriage. It is in family life that we experience best the love our God has for us. The ideal for married life that Jesus presents to us today is what we hope for and pray that we may be able to live. But we know that almost every family is touched by the pain of marriage breakdown. Today we pray in a special way for those who have experienced divorce. We ask the Lord to help us to know how best to allow his love and healing to reach out to them.