

27th Sunday of Ordinary Time – B Cycle

October 7, 2012

(Genesis 2,18-24; Hebrews 2,9-11; Mark 10,2-12) A comedian (I think it was Red Skelton) talking about his marriage once said, our marriage greatly improved once we got separate bedrooms. Hers is in New York and mine is in Miami. Whether a person is married or whether a person lives a single life, there will be challenges. Jesus talks to us today about marriage and some of its challenges. As our gospel begins, some Pharisees ask him if it were lawful for a husband to divorce his wife. The gospel tells us they asked this question as a test. We will see in a moment what they were up to. Jesus saw it right away.

Jewish society was a male dominated society, and the issue in today's gospel is all about a man divorcing his wife. In the Jewish culture, a woman could not divorce her husband. The Pharisees' question is if divorce is lawful. Most Jews thought it was lawful since Moses, in Deuteronomy, seems to have permitted a husband to divorce his wife. If you read the actual passage in Deuteronomy (Deut. 24,1ff), you would see that Moses never declared divorce was lawful. The fact is that nowhere in the Old Testament is divorce said to be lawful. The prophet Malachi says clearly God hates divorce (Malachi 2,16). A better understanding of Moses' attitude toward divorce would be that he overlooked it in view of the people's hardness of heart – whatever that might have meant. He did make certain rules about divorce if it occurred. By the time of Jesus, however, divorce among the Jews was considered lawful although it was probably not all that frequent. But there is something more behind the Pharisee's question whether divorce was lawful. If we look at Matthew's gospel, the question the Pharisees ask is whether it is lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause? That was the real issue and that's where there was a lot of controversy. Some rabbis allowed divorce only for the most serious reason while others allowed divorce if the wife spoiled a dinner or if the man found himself attracted to someone else.

In answering the Pharisee's question, Jesus showed himself, as he often did, as having the authority to interpret God's law. He brushed aside all their questions about whether it was lawful or unlawful, or under what circumstances it was lawful or unlawful. He said there should be no divorce at all. Then Jesus referred to the story of creation (our first reading) for Scriptural proof that it was God's intention that when God made man and woman they became one flesh and no human being had the power to separate them. Practically speaking, there are situations where people need to separate, where their relationship is toxic or unmanageable or even possibly lethal. Even Jesus knew that could happen, but he adds to his teaching that should it happen the divorced person is to remain unmarried: "whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her." Mark adds, and if the wife "divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." This added thought applied Jesus' teachings to those Gentiles who would be converting to Jesus, for, even though Jewish women could not sue for divorce, Gentile women were, by Roman law, allowed to sue for divorce.

Jesus has given us his teaching on marriage and divorce. That is important in view of the

common attitude today that marriage is for many people whatever they want it to be; that it is a personal arrangement between two people who can make it or break it whenever they choose. The solemn commitment “for better or for worse until death” has little meaning for many people today. That’s why Jesus’ teaching is difficult for today’s world. Yet if we believe in Jesus as God’s spokesperson, then his teachings (and not the attitude that dominates our culture) must guide our thinking about marriage.

This teaching of Jesus is in Matthew, Luke and St. Paul. Matthew makes an exception to Jesus’ sanction of divorce and remarriage when he quotes Jesus as saying: “whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” (Mt. 19,9) The phrase “except for immorality” has been greatly debated. The Greek word used here, which is translated immorality, is *porneia*. The English word pornographic comes from this word. In the Greek dictionary, it means “various kinds of unsanctioned sexual intercourse.” On the basis of this exception, many people would like to believe that if their spouse is unfaithful, divorce and remarriage is permitted. This is not the Catholic understanding of Matthew. Our understanding of this passage is that the exception Matthew makes refers to marriages that were already unlawful such as marriages between close relatives. Hence Matthew’s exception is not an exception to Jesus’ general prohibition of divorce and remarriage; rather Matthew is saying that Jesus’ teaching does not apply to relationships that are already forbidden by God’s law.

The Catholic Church has always tried to be loyal to Jesus’ teaching in its policies on marriage and it’s not always a popular stand. Many people, whose first marriage failed, have sought and received an annulment from the Church and have been able to be married in the Church a second time. When the Church grants an annulment, it is not granting a divorce. An annulment simply states that a particular marriage, even if it were valid civilly, did not meet the standards for validity required by the Church and, therefore, the couple are not bound to one another in God’s eyes. But even if a person could not get an annulment, the Church does not encourage the person to break up with a second spouse if they have one but to continue to come to Mass and to live a good Christian life to the best of their abilities. We see how pastorally Jesus treated the woman he met at the Samaritan well who had been married to five husbands (John 4,17&18).

There is so much that could be said about this topic. If we had another half hour (which we don’t have) we could comment on the serious effects divorce has on society and on children who are the product of a broken marriage. Three hundred years before Christ, the philosopher Aristotle said, “divorce is to family life what civil war is to the state.” Since the matter of divorce is often painful, it is helpful to remember that Jesus’ deep intent was not to cause pain but to set out a clear and high ideal of human relations, a vision of marriage as a covenant of personal love between spouses which reflects the covenant relationship of God and his people. Unfortunately, this vision does not always fit the vagaries of the human heart. (*Jer. 17.9*)” *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, pg 643, #32

28th Sunday Ordinary Time - B Cycle

October 14, 2012

Attitudes toward wealth were ambiguous in the ancient world as well as in Jewish literature. Deuteronomy and some of the Wisdom writings tell us those who obey God's commandments will be rewarded with prosperity. On the other hand, the prophets condemned those who were wealthy for they often took advantage of the poor and had lavish lifestyles without giving consideration to those who were needy. (Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus reflects this attitude.) Our first reading reminds us that there are more precious things in life than having big stashes of wealth. The author of the Book of Wisdom prayed for prudence and the spirit of Wisdom and stated all gold, in view of her (Wisdom), is a little sand, and before her, silver is to be accounted mire (swampy ground or mud). This is very similar to Plato's teaching in the Republic that true riches come with a good and prudent life rather than from the counterfeit treasures of gold.

Perhaps the apostles were thinking of the idea in Deuteronomy that those who obey God's commandments will be rewarded with prosperity. They were surprised to hear Jesus say, "how hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." Then Jesus goes on to say that entering the kingdom is not easy for any of us: "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God." No one knows of any gate in Jerusalem called the "eye of the needle." Jesus' example of a camel getting through the eye of a needle was a graphic way of saying it's not possible. It's only possible with God's grace: "For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God."

Jesus' response after the rich young man left was in disappointed surprise. He saw that the rich man, whom Jesus saw with love, would prefer worldly wealth to the riches of the kingdom of God. Sometimes those who have some wealth, even a modest amount, feel they are being condemned when they hear today's gospel. Let's realize first of all, practically speaking, the early missionaries, such as St. Paul, would have had great difficulty in founding Churches in various cities and towns without the help of those who were wealthy. The early Churches had to gather somewhere to hear God's word and to celebrate the Eucharist and that was usually at the home of someone of means whose place was large enough to accommodate everyone. Remember church buildings did not exist until the 4th century.

I want to remind you of two other places where Jesus expresses a negative view, or at least a cautious view, of wealth. Jesus said: "where your treasure is there will your heart be." (Mt. 6,21). In that sense, any of us could be led astray by wealth, however much we may have or not have, if we lose our focus on God's kingdom. The other place is where Jesus tells the story of the sower and the seed. Remember the seed that fell among the weeds and as it tried to grow it got choked out. Jesus compared this to those "who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word and it yields nothing." (Mk.4,19) In that sense, even the poorest among us can be so absorbed by activities and distractions, TV and cell phones and magazines and music and sports and computers, etc.,

we make no time to pray or come to Church or live as Christ has taught us. That's my homily on the gospel. God has blessed us in many ways. Let us not forget where it comes from.

I want to say a few things personally. The other day I was with a few people and the topic of birthday's came up. I mentioned I was turning 75 on Sunday. One person commented "you're doing pretty good for 75;" and she added with great surprise, "you still drive!" For a split second I worried that maybe I should turn in my car keys. Canon Law requires pastors to write a letter of resignation to the Archbishop when they turn 75. Of course I did, but I added that I would be willing to continue serving here if he wished. Part of the process the Archdiocese has when a pastor turns 75 is for Bishop Binzer to meet with the Parish Pastoral Council, which he did here last week. Next week the Priests' Personnel Board meets and they will make a recommendation to the Archbishop. I feel very sure the Archbishop and the Personnel Board will decide that I stay here.

Other than not having as much energy as I used to, and other than my knees, I would feel in every other way as if I were 20 years younger. My knees keep reminding me though that I'm 75. Several people have asked me if I have Parkinson's when they see my right hand shake. It doesn't always bother me, but I do not have Parkinson's. The doctor said it is just a benign tremor that people sometimes experience only with their right hand. When I go out to eat sometimes, it is embarrassing, and it makes it hard to write legibly, but I could have worse problems. In my early years as a priest I used to enjoy painting and thought I could do a lot more painting when I retired. That's out of the question now (and maybe retirement will be too). I remind myself that Thomas Jefferson started the University of Virginia, secured its location, designed its buildings, planned its curriculum and became its first rector at the age of 76.

I like being here; I like doing what I'm doing most of the time (except when I have three weeks' worth of work that has to be completed in three days). St. Boniface has been good to me and I've tried to return the favor. I'm grateful for all the support I have always been given and the response of our parishioners whenever I've asked for your help. So I'll just say thank you and hope you will keep me in your prayers as I enter into what is laughingly referred to as the "Golden Years." Peace to every one of you.

29th Sunday Ordinary Time - B Cycle

October 21, 2012

INTRODUCTION: (Isaiah 53,10-11; Heb 4,14-16; Mk 10,35-45)

Today our first reading is a portion of Isaiah's fourth Servant Song. Isaiah tells us God's servant was a mysterious person or persons whose faithfulness and suffering would bring redemption to many people. The four Servant Songs of Isaiah were written 500 years before Christ. This passage was chosen because it corresponds with Jesus' revelation in today's gospel to his apostles that he came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. The entire fourth Servant Song is part of the Good Friday service every year.

HOMILY

Jesus told James and John in today's gospel: "you do not know what you are asking." Indeed they did not. James and John, along with all the Apostles, had no idea what the future held for any of them. Peter had recently confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah which means the anointed one. They expected Jesus would soon be the glorified ruler of God's people. The Romans, who governed all the area around the Mediterranean, would no longer control Israel. The Apostles figured they would be Jesus' chief generals, sharing in his glory. They saw themselves lifted high, enjoying honor, prestige, importance and authority.

It's not a flattering picture of James and John or of the other Apostles who were angry at James and John for this display of selfish ambition. St. Matthew softened this negative picture of James and John by telling us in his gospel that the mother of James and John came forward to ask this special favor for her sons. It is possible that she was involved in one way or another in trying to get her sons raised in importance and rank above the rest.

Just moments before James and John approached Jesus with their bold request, Jesus had told them for the third time that he "will be turned over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and turn him over to the Gentiles and they will mock him and spit on him and scourge him and kill him; and after three days he will arise." It's a wonder Jesus didn't just pull his hair out or laugh right in their faces when James and John came to him asking him to do for them whatever they wanted. But that was not Jesus' style. He knew the Apostles still had a lot to learn. He patiently discussed their request with them and in the process of giving them an answer, he was able to teach them further. They still didn't understand, but Jesus planted the idea in their mind about what was important in God's kingdom. It is service done in love, not an erotic kind of love, but a kind of love that cares and that often requires sacrifice. Jesus' love led him to be faithful to his mission of preaching, teaching, healing, and casting out demons - a mission that brought him into conflict with the religious leaders and which eventually cost him his life. God was glorified in Jesus' loving service to God's people and God's power overcame those who plotted against Jesus and who thought they destroyed him. God's power even overcame the power of death by rising to new life, a life Jesus has promised to share with those who follow his way, his way of obedience to the Father and of loving service to others.

Eventually the Apostles would learn the important message Jesus taught: "Whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant;" for as long as they stayed near Jesus they would have the example of the One who came "to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus gave us the Eucharist to help us celebrate and remember that great love and to be able to share in its saving and life-giving power. Amen.

30th Sunday of Ordinary Time - B Cycle

October 28, 2012

In today's gospel Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, could see Jesus more clearly than everyone who had physical sight. He could see beyond what others could see with their eyes as he called out to Jesus: "Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me." There is a lot packed into those few words. "Son of David" was a royal title referring to a descendant of the great king David, one who would be anointed by God to be king and savior of God's people. The Greek word for "the anointed one" is "Christos" or in English, "Christ." Bartimaeus was not the first person to recognize Jesus as the Son of David or as the Christ. Peter did at Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asked the Apostles: "who do you say that I am." The crowd who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem had also recognized Jesus as Son of David. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the crowd called out as he came riding in on a donkey: "Hosanna to the Son of David. Hosanna means, "Save, please!" I say all this so you know that Bartimaeus was not the only person who recognized Jesus as the royal Messiah and who was willing to address him as Son of David. Bartimaeus had more than just a generic faith that Jesus came to save everyone; he knew the saving power of the Son of David could and would save him. His faith was deeply personal. He did not let himself be discouraged by those who told him to be quiet when he called out to Jesus. Rather he only got louder when people tried to silence him: "Son of David, have mercy (or pity) on me." I might mention in the original Greek "have mercy" is *ἐλεησέ με*. It is a Greek word that many of us remember from the old Latin Mass: Kyrie, eleison. (Kyrie means Lord, by the way.) Like Bartimaeus, we begin our Mass asking God to have mercy or pity on us. This is not just a plea for forgiveness of sins. The kyrie eleison is a plea for God or Jesus to help us in any way we need his help. As we cry Kyrie eleison, (Lord, have mercy!) he invites us, as he invited Bartimaeus, to tell him: "what do you want me to do for you?" That's why we pause for a moment before the opening prayer - to mention in our hearts our special intentions.

On Monday afternoon I started reflecting on today's gospel about Jesus healing blindness. Later that evening I listened to the debates on TV. I came away from the debates thinking this is one area where we all need a clear vision to see beyond all the hoopla and spin that comes out of politics so we can cast our vote for a leader who will lead our country with respect for the values of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Each of us must pray for guidance on whom that leader might be.

Certain issues that are both political and moral may be and should be addressed in Church, as for example: abortion, but we are not supposed to speak in support of candidates or political parties, so don't worry, I'm not going to get political. As the week progressed and as I continued to reflect on today's gospel, I thought that the main forms of blindness we humans have to deal with are our illusions, and they are many. Let me illustrate what I mean by illusion. There was a cartoon in Reader's Digest (Laughter, the Best Medicine, pg 152) displaying four people sunbathing on a Florida beach: there was a lady in her late 60's I would guess, engaged in conversation with a lady friend next to her. The husband of the first lady was near his wife, but not sunbathing. He was standing up, a huge man, especially large around the middle, holding

up his arms as if to show his muscles, with a big grin on his face. This gesture was a way of trying to show off in front of a young, beautiful woman with a skimpy bathing suit who happened to be walking by at that moment, and who was totally unimpressed by his overly massive abdomen. His wife, the lady in her 60's, was saying to her friend: "my son's into extreme sports, my daughter's into extreme makeover, and my husband's into extreme denial." Denial and illusion are two sides of the same coin. We deny what really is because we have the illusion that reality is something else. Other examples: a person might imagine that they are the most wonderful human being who has ever walked the face of the earth, (and you may have known such people) or, conversely a person might think that he or she is the most miserable person who ever lived. A person might think themselves to be another Einstein or they might be always putting themselves down as just a big jerk. I have met both kinds. Probably the greatest illusion many people have is thinking they don't need God except maybe once a week. Or for some, maybe not even that often. For these people, God is just a word they use if they get angry or if they hurt themselves - although they have him tucked away in a closet somewhere just in case they get some really serious problem. The reality is we need God to support us at every moment of our lives. We are not as "in charge" as we would like to believe we are. That is reality.

Bartimaeus had a depth of inner vision in Jesus as his Messiah and Savior. He wasn't going to abandon his plea for help even when everyone else around him told him to "forget it." After Jesus healed him, Jesus told him to "go your way." Bartimaeus decided to make his "way" the way of Jesus and Mark tells us Bartimaeus followed Jesus "on the way," the way that led to Jerusalem and suffering, death and resurrection. In this miracle story, St. Mark, no doubt, is encouraging his hearers (and us) to choose Jesus as our leader and to follow his way – the way that leads to life.