

## Readings for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

6<sup>th</sup> October 2024

### First Reading: Genesis 2:18-24

The Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man to see what he would call them, and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle and to the birds of the air and to every animal of the field, but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

### Second Reading: Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. But someone has testified somewhere, "What are humans that you are mindful of them or mortals that you care for them? You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honour, subjecting all things under their feet." Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you."

### Gospel: St Mark 10:2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother

and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. Jesus said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

### **A Reflection for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost**

It is a sobering thought that, tomorrow, it will be one year since the Hamas attacks in Israel, attacks that led to the devastating reprisals in Gaza, and inexorably towards the widening conflict across the Middle East that we see now. Many thousands of innocent people have been harmed in Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and Iran, alongside catastrophic destruction of the wider environment and natural resources. Like all wars, it is a stark example of just how difficult we human beings find it to live in harmony and understanding with one another, and the horrific impacts that can occur when our relationships break down.

Last week, in my reflection for Harvest, I reminded us that God calls us to relationship, to live in community with God, with one another and with all of creation. Today, all our readings have something to say about the nature of those relationships.

The context of our Gospel reading continues to be Jesus' journey towards Jerusalem, and all that will await him there, all the while teaching his disciples about how God wishes them to live well as human beings made in God's image. Here, his words about divorce sound unusually harsh, and are particularly uncomfortable for those who have experienced divorce, so it is important that we consider carefully what is happening here. If we look at the first sentence, it says: 'Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"' This question was not really about the rights and wrongs of divorce; these Pharisees weren't interested in the preservation of marriage. They were trying to catch Jesus out on matters of the Law.

At that time, there was a very public debate about Herod's divorce. Under the Law, men could divorce their wives, and often did so on little more than a whim, as Herod appears to have done, but women had no such right. Herod's divorce had been condemned by John the Baptist, leading to his imprisonment and then beheading. We know that the Pharisees found Jesus irksome and perhaps they hoped to get Jesus into similar trouble through their question. They already knew the legal answer to their question and Jesus, seeing through their pretence, responded in a similar vein, following the letter of the Law for those who imposed it on others. It is an ideal for God's Kingdom, rather than reflecting the reality of human experience and frailty.

But then, as he so often does, Jesus starts to re-interpret the Law. He suggests that a woman might divorce her husband, something that the Law did not permit, something that hints at greater equality, something that would have shocked those Pharisees.

All human relationships, of which marriage is only one example, are rarely ideal and often messy. It's something we all experience. No-one enters any relationship, particularly a close one, intending that it will break down, but this can happen and sometimes separation, divorce in the case of marriage, is the least harmful option.

Having dealt with the Pharisees, Jesus moves swiftly back to the main thrust of his teaching: his concern for the most vulnerable. The Kingdom of God is founded on bonds of love. As it says in the first letter of John, in words that we use each week in our liturgy: 'We love because God loved us first.' And Jesus taught us that to love God and to love others is to fulfil the two most important commandments. So his imperative for his followers is to live their lives building relationships founded on love, and in the service of the vulnerable and needy, following Jesus' own example.

The little children represent the most vulnerable in society, people who could be any of us at times, in our vulnerabilities. Jesus reprimands the disciples, who could also be us, for turning them away and calls them to come to him, for them to be blessed and healed, as he declares that it is to the vulnerable that the Kingdom of God belongs.

Jesus understands just how difficult relationships can be for us at times. The letter to the Hebrews starts by reminding us that God has been in relationship with his people for a long time: 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors...'. And today's passage goes on to remind us that although Jesus now reigns in glory at the right hand of God, in his earthly life, he was also fully human – so he understands our struggles and our suffering. And at the end of this passage, Christian family relationships are underscored: we all have one Father in God, and we are all brothers and sisters with Jesus.

The passage from Hebrews also reminds us of our responsibility to and relationship with all of creation. 'Subjecting all things under their feet' is not an invitation to exploitation, of course, it is a reminder of our duty of care, as people made in the image of God.

In the reading from Genesis, in the second account of creation from that book, we hear of God forming the animals and birds and bringing them to the human to be named. Naming things is something that most of us do rarely: our children, our pets, perhaps. Names are important; they reflect what's important to us, perhaps what we hope for in the new life of a child, or are a gesture of respect to another family member. Naming someone is an act of relationship, usually very close relationship. A few people might be involved in naming such things as places or streets or buildings, such names often reflecting things or people that are important to the community, which are about the history and relationships of people in that place. So God, in bringing the animals to the human to be named, is emphasising the closeness of the relationship between humanity and all of creation.

This passage also recognises the divinely ordained importance of relationships for humans. God says: 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' God recognises our need for companionship; we need one another to thrive. It's true that some of us find that companionship with other animals, showing the

close integration of creation. But to have a helper acknowledges that we need one another to enable those things which we cannot do alone. We need other human beings.

Interestingly, the word that is translated here as 'man' is not specifically male. It is only at the end of the passage, when the second human was created that the sexes are distinguished. Even then, the emphasis is on similarity and equality rather than difference and hierarchy: 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.' And if we are all flesh of one another's flesh, how should we treat each other? With love, respect and care, even when relationships aren't what they might be, and not just in couples, but with all of humanity.

Tomorrow, as in recent days, we will no doubt hear more about the tragedy that continues to unfold in the Middle East. Tempting as it may be, try not to turn away, but enfold all those caught up in the horror of war in your prayers. Pray for a laying down of arms, and a genuine desire for reconciliation and peace, remembering that each of us, as a follower of Christ, is called to a life of love and service and to care for one another, especially the most vulnerable.