

# Reflection on the Readings for the 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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The rate of marriage generally has declined in Australia and couples have been marrying later. In broader society there is today a general acceptance for an unhappy marriage to end, even if there are children involved. Secular diversity is growing in Australia, social attitudes towards marriage, cohabitation and same-sex relationships have changed. There has been a significant but consistent shift in the choice of celebrants and places for marriage ceremonies over the last 50 years. An increasing number of couples have turned to a civil celebrant to conduct their marriage ceremony in a place of their choosing rather than a Church and a minister of religion. The Commonwealth Government's *Australian Institute of Family Studies* measures the numbers of divorces per 1,000 Australian residents over time. Their research shows that prior to World War II, divorce was rare, then the divorce rate rose in the 1960s and 1970s and dramatically peaked at 4.6 divorces per 1,000 residents following the introduction of the *Family Law Act 1975*. This Act came into operation in January 1976 and allowed no-fault divorce. However the divorce rate started trending down in the 2000's and in 2016 it was sitting at 1.9, the lowest rate since 1976. It rose slightly in 2017 to sit at round 2.0 divorces per 1000 Australians and in 2019 it remained at around 1.9.

Let's for a moment contrast this twenty first century scenario with that of today's reading from Saint Mark's gospel. Immediately we can see that Jesus' teaching on marriage, and the prohibition on divorce, may be a well-received message to those who receive from God the wonderful gift of happy and

fulfilling marital union, but it may be received as source of anguish for those whose attempt at marriage has failed, if in fact received at all.

Separation and divorce can be traumatic for anyone involved, especially children. Separation and divorce are among the toughest experiences of life. Separation is complex and can involve intense feelings due to the many changes that can occur at that time. These aspects have remain unchanged down through the ages, but clearly the historical and cultural arrangements for marriage and divorce are not the same in the Bible as they are today. At that time women and children had no rights, they were viewed as property. When a man married he acquired property, it was an exchange of property between the woman's father, who owned her, and the man who was going to marry her. Because women were property, the man is the only one who had the power to divorce. Divorce was devastating for the woman, she was disgraced, financially ruined, she may even have been driven to become an outcast, begging for her and her children's very survival.

So it is with this perspective we can view Jesus answering the question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He does this not with a legal response from the Law of Moses but rather with and ethical and moral response. Jesus is all about loving, merciful relationships. Jesus is concerned about the impact on the relationship, he is in effect saying this woman is not property she is always first and foremost a person with dignity. He wants to lift our hearts and minds out of the cold hard transactional mode to see the man and woman in relationship with the eyes of love and mercy. God has compassion and utmost care for human struggles, God heals, God is on the side of the most

vulnerable, he raises the vulnerable out of obscurity so we can see their fullest humanity. This vision is reinforced by the second part of our gospel reading in which Jesus reminds us that the child, and a child's unencumbered receptiveness to love, is really the key to our understanding of the Kingdom of God. The passage is less about law and legality or the ordering relationships, and more about a glimpse or vision of God's loving plan for all humankind, especially the little ones, those who have no power of their own. That is the scriptural and theological perspective and it's good to know, but what can we also say about the personal lived experience?

I was twenty four years old when my own parents separated, my father didn't anticipate the separation and he certainly didn't anticipate the separation happening so suddenly, and he didn't want the separation in the first place. My father was a quiet and gentle man and as far as I was able to ascertain my mother had come to a point in her life where a chance encounter with another man gave her less reason to stay in what she saw as a stale and unfulfilling marriage.

My personal experience of having parents who separated came as a shock, overnight it changed relationships, family structure and even my sense of identity. Looking back now I think it made me a 'child' of that separation, even though I was a young independent adult and had lived on my own since I was fifteen. Having said this I was glad I was an adult when it happened. As an adult, despite being unhappy with it all, I was perhaps able to better predict how separation and divorce would change my family and foresee things that I couldn't or wouldn't have known if I had been very much younger.

At the time all this occurred I was still single, I distinctly remember thinking that if I ever got married than I would make a commitment to be the best husband I could be and that my marriage would be for a lifetime. Well I was young and naïve and a touch arrogant to think I could do better than so many other good people who don't succeed in that aspiration despite the best of intentions. However I am grateful that I married a good woman who loves me and accepts all my imperfections, and now after forty one years of marriage my only regret is that the journey of life seems to accelerate as I age and I do so wish we could remain married for ever. I look to faith as the only acceptable answer to this quandary. I choose to trust, that when unto both our deaths do we finally part this earth, we will find our desires and hopes fulfilled in ways which we cannot even begin to imagine. Catholics believe that the ultimate end of human life is loving union with God and neighbour, I choose to trust then that our union will take on a new and even greater form.

This is my and our blessed journey, but I know that everyone's life is unique and relationships are extremely complex. I take comfort in knowing that Christ did indeed raise marriage to a sacrament and that the Church recognises that every human person is made in the image of God and has inviolable dignity. I see every human person as a gift, deserving respect and love. I believe that nobody can truly judge another person's moral and life struggles but God alone, and this is all premised on the acceptance of the teaching of Jesus in Scripture and Church tradition, which realistically and challengingly is not a worldview that most Australians accept today.

Sadly many relationships will continue fail. There is much we could say about this but for now this remains a broader topic than the scope of this reflection. I want to touch on one element of separation and divorce that I have witnessed in ministry and is a very live and important topic on which health and life may well depend.

There are clearly some circumstances where one or other of the parties to marriage fail to see that God's will for them to love their spouse, is a will for the good for the other person, in all times and circumstances.

There are very serious decisions to work through in all this, however let us be absolutely clear about one vital aspect, and that is that another human being is never our property and tolerating abuse is never serving the good of conjugal love and unity, or indeed God's will as I understand scripture and tradition. I would encourage that the victim of various forms of abuse should think about seeking professional help and support. If need be, this may result in them loving their spouse by holding them accountable for their wrong and even their criminal behaviour. The United States Bishops' pastoral document, *"When I Call for Help,"* states;

*"The person being assaulted needs to know that acting to end the abuse does not violate the marriage promises...this is true whether the separation is temporary or permanent."*

And then there is the question of pastoral care for those in our community who have experienced the tragedy of separation and divorce, they need to know that they are loved by Christ and the Church. In receiving this care they may well choose to seek

good counsel and, where appropriate, initiate a Church examination of the failed marriage.

I speak about this from personal experience. Before I was married, some 41 years ago, my wife needed to seek and indeed obtain an annulment from her previous marriage, a marriage where her previous husband abandoned her with five young children to raise on her own. Thankfully with God's help and myself entering into a relationship with five teenagers, (thank goodness they were kind to me!) I can truly look back and say we were not alone and I feel that God was willing our good, every step of the way.

Let me conclude by saying that Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation "*Amoris Laetitia*" was released some five years ago today, on April 8, 2016. Its title is Latin for "*The Joy of Love*," it observes the difficulties families face in these times and gently urges more compassion toward parishioners whose relationships do not always match the church's ideal. While still encouraging Catholics to live up to the church's ideal for marriage, the challenge of "*Amoris Laetitia*" is to see where the Holy Spirit is calling all people to holiness, no matter how complex and challenging is the concrete reality of our lives, God is with us. I leave you with this quote from the Holy Father in 'The Joy of Love'.

*"I thank God that many families, which are far from considering themselves perfect, live in love, fulfil their calling and keep moving forward, even if they fall many times along the way. The Synod's reflections show us that there is no stereotype of the ideal family, but rather a challenging mosaic made up of many different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems."* [57]