

HIW 21.10.2012

St. Mark Ch. 10, vv. 2-12

My text is the passage from St Mark's Gospel we heard as the Second Reading; and in particular Verses 5-6: **"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. But at the beginning of creation**" – and here I will depart from St Mark's version for a moment and quote from the parallel passage in St Matthew, because I like the way he puts it: – **"from the beginning it was not so."** [Mt. 19:8]

When I first started to consider this text, the story came to my mind of the American archbishop – I've forgotten his name – who found himself being questioned by those modern Pharisees that we call journalists. One of them asked him: "What do you think of sin?" The Archbishop replied: "I'm against it."

Actually, when I first found out that the Gospel reading appointed for today was this passage about divorce, my immediate feeling was: "Help! I can't preach on that!" Divorce is such a common feature of today's society that we take it almost as a matter of course. Some members of our immediate family are or were divorced, and remarried. I had no idea how many of you, the people I would be speaking to, might be in the same position, and so I approached the topic with a considerable amount of anxious hesitation, wondering how many people's toes I might tread on, how many people's feelings I might hurt. For there do not seem to be any two ways of interpreting this story: to put it briefly, the Pharisees ask Jesus what he thinks about divorce, and he answers: "I'm against it!" – But gradually the feeling grew that I should not run away from the topic; after all, one of the points of having a set calendar of readings is to make sure that preachers do not only select the easy texts, but are obliged on occasions to pick up the hot potato, or grasp the nettle, whichever image you prefer. But one thing that was clear to me was this: if I, layman as I am, stand here in this pulpit, I do so to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and if Jesus says "I'm against it", you will not find me taking the line, "He didn't really mean it like

that,” or “Of course we live in a very different world today, and if Jesus were here today he would probably look at things differently.” Because in the passage we have heard, it is precisely that attitude, “We live in a different world today”, that Jesus challenges: precisely that challenge lies in his words, “From the beginning it was not so.”

According to our text, the Pharisees came to Jesus and tested him with their question. It is not immediately obvious in what way this question was a “test”: but the most likely explanation would seem to be that the Pharisees were trying to trick Jesus into taking a position that was in contradiction to the law of Moses, and so might form the basis for an accusation against him. When they ask, “Is it lawful?”, this is of course different from asking “Is it legal?” As we know from the Passion story, the Jews under Roman occupation were not in a position to enforce their religious law in a secular context: Roman law prohibited them from putting someone to death for blasphemy, although religious law demanded it. So the question is clearly, “Is divorce in accordance with the law of God?” This might seem a strange question for people to put who presumably know the content of the Torah, the books of the law, very well; and indeed I see Jesus’ reply, “What did Moses command you?”, as being more or less equivalent to saying, “Why do you ask me? Don’t you know the answer yourselves?” The situation is very like the one in which the Pharisees ask Jesus, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?” [Mk 13:14] – lawful, again, meaning of course in accordance with religious law, or the law of God, since Roman law naturally required subjects to pay taxes to the Emperor. Here too, Jesus does not answer the question but says “Show me a coin” [Mk 13:15] – another way of saying “Don’t you know the answer yourselves?”, since they know just as well as Jesus does that the coins bear the picture and title of the Emperor, so that to use them at all is to acknowledge his authority.

But going back to our case, it is notable that Jesus asks “What did Moses command you?” and not “What does God command you?” For the religious establishment, the Law of Moses and the Law of God were one and the same

thing. Moses, after all, brought from God the Ten Commandments, and their status as the Law of God was, and I would say still is, indisputable in either a Jewish or a Christian context. But Jesus does not place the whole of the Books of Moses on a level with the Ten Commandments. On another occasion, Jesus told an inquirer what the greatest of all the commandments is, and accepted the inquirer's differentiating comment that "to love God, and one's neighbour as oneself, is more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices" [Mk 13:33]; and so here, what Moses wrote "because your hearts were hard" falls far behind both what is in the Ten Commandments – "Thou shalt not commit adultery" – and what was "from the beginning of creation" – God's original purpose for the world, in which man and woman "become one flesh", are joined by God, and so cannot be separated by men - a fact displayed to the world by the children born of their union, who are an indivisible mixture of their father and mother.

As is often the case, the English language with its wealth of words derived from Latin and Greek comes over as less forcefully direct than German: the word "adultery" lacks the impact of the German "Ehebruch" – "marriage-breaking". Nevertheless, it falls hard on our modern ears when Jesus very definitely equates divorce and adultery. Adultery, he says, is not only unfaithfulness within a marriage, it is also the separation of those joined by God; both of them are "Ehebruch", the breaking of a marriage. What also comes as a surprise to us, because it seems so modern and quite out of tune with Biblical times, is that Jesus quite unambiguously places men and women on an equal footing. The Pharisees had asked: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" They did not ask "Is it lawful for a wife to divorce her husband?", and I suspect that it may never have occurred to them that such a thing was possible. But Jesus widens his answer to encompass both: "Anyone who divorces his wife commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery." There is no double standard here.

Jesus takes us back to the original purpose of God: "The two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one." When two people decide they

belong together, then within the great design of God's creation they too are creating: something new, a new unity of body and soul that cannot be torn apart again without at the same time doing damage to God's creation.

If you were prepared to listen to me for an hour or two, I might go into the question of what people understood by marriage in the time when the Book of Genesis was written, in the time of Jesus, and today. I don't want to do that, although it is just worth mentioning that even in the Book of Genesis, love between husband and wife is not an unknown concept. In the case of the arranged marriage between Isaac and Rebekah, love came after marriage: "she became his wife, and he loved her" [Gen. 24:67]; in the case of Jacob and Rachel, he loved her first and served her father Laban for seven years to get her, "which seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her" [Gen. 29:20], as it says in the story. But that case brings us into all the complications surrounding the issue of polygamy, which I certainly don't want to go into; except to draw attention once again to Jesus' declaration: "From the beginning it was not so". The passage from Genesis that Jesus quotes can only, as I see it, imply a state of monogamy: how otherwise can they be said to be "one flesh"? And this applies not only to having multiple wives or husbands simultaneously, but also to the condition known as "serial polygamy", a succession of brief marriages, that is only too common today. Unfortunately we do not have any comment from Jesus on the polygamy of the patriarchs or of the kings of Israel, notably King David: but we do have his daring remark with regard to Moses and the certificate of divorce: "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law."

Because your hearts were hard; because of your lack of love. Because in all your actions, you fall short of the glory of God. That is Jesus' diagnosis of why divorce had to be made legal, if not lawful in the sense of being in accordance with the will of God. If such a large proportion of marriages are dissolved today – I don't need to give you the figures, we see it all around us – surely one major reason is that in today's society maintaining a marriage has fallen in the list of priorities, in the ranking of what is important among people's aims in life.

But if the two of us are one flesh, if we are no longer two but one, how can we pursue aims in life that are so different that they lead us to break that unity, that new part of God's creation? Should not the pursuit of all our aims be subordinate to that principle, that whatever aims we pursue, we do it together, with and for each other? Those who enter a marriage in the belief that God intends it to be a bond for life, and who themselves intend it to be so, know that they need to work on making it so, that they need to have the will to make their marriage succeed; and they will make that their priority above everything else, so that other decisions that have to be made in response to changing situations as life goes on – decisions about jobs and about where to live, for example – are subordinate to it. And that applies, of course, to both parties equally; both need to work at making sure that they remain aware of the other's needs and concerns, and respond to them, so that their relationship remains alive.

In last week's edition of "Die Zeit" there was an interesting article by Norbert Blüm on "reconciling job and family", headed by the question: "Marriage and family are subordinated to the world of work, and everybody thinks that is the modern way: why?" Why indeed? In the beginning it was not so. We know of people who conduct what they call a "Fernehe", a "long-distance marriage", because they work in different towns and see each other only at the weekends; they seem to consider this a viable, dare I say "modern", form of marriage; but I find it very sad. To quote just one sentence from Norbert Blüm's article: "Die Partnerschaft zwischen zwei Menschen ist die eigentliche Utopie einer herrschaftsfreien Gesellschaft" – "Partnership between two people is the true Utopia of a society freed from domination, freed from authoritarianism." In other words, marriage gives us protection against social constraints, and for that reason too is worthy of protection itself.

All right, the catch in that is the word "Utopia". As you probably know, "Utopia" means "Nowhere". It's not something that actually exists: isn't it rather an unreachable ideal? Perhaps. But I don't think there is anything wrong with pursuing unreachable ideals. Jesus' teaching, in the Sermon on the Mount and

elsewhere, so often faces us with absolute claims that perhaps none of us can live up to – at most occasionally, as with turning the other cheek, or not at all, like cutting off your hand if it offends you. I do not believe God gave us the Ten Commandments, and I do not think that Jesus preached his Sermon on the Mount, expecting that they would be fulfilled by everybody and all the time. But is it not good that we have before our eyes a standard of what perfection would be, of what we should strive to achieve, which our own actions and our failures, our love and our lack of love, can be measured against?

As we heard in our First Reading today, from the story of Noah's Flood, there was a time when God himself saw that humankind was intent on destroying his creation, and decided he had better do it himself instead. But then he changed his mind; not just *because* he found in Noah one man who was ready to follow his commands, but also *in spite of the fact* that he knew that in future, things were likely to continue just as they had before the Flood: "Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood" [Gen. 8:21]. Even though he is fully aware of Man's incorrigibly sinful nature, God declares his support for his fallen creature: because he loves him. Sin? – Yes, he is against it. But the love for the fallen world and for the sinner – that love which would lead him to give his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life [Jn 3:16] – also leads him to make his promise to Noah and the descendants of Noah: "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease" [Gen. 8:22].

And so the loving care of God and the loving mercy of Jesus encompass the woman taken in adultery, whose sin, he made clear, was no greater than that of those who wanted to stone her, and certainly, by implication, no greater than that of the man she committed adultery with [Jn 8:3-7]; it encompasses the Samaritan woman who had had five husbands, and to whom he offered the water of life [Jn 4:7-19]; and the sinner who wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair, and whose many sins were forgiven, "because she loved much."

[Lk 7:47]. Yet at the same time, Jesus still has the highest expectations of us, frail and sinful as we are. He challenges us to take as our standard, not the watered down provisions permitted us because our hearts are hard, but the shining light of God's eternal will. To the woman taken in adultery he did not only say "Neither do I condemn you"; he also said: "Go and sin no more"; or in the newer translation, "Go now and leave your life of sin" [Jn 8:11].

"Who is a pardoning God like thee, or who has grace so rich and free?", we have just sung. Sin? He's against it. My wife and I were once invited to a party to celebrate a divorce, which we thought was very sad, and we hope we will never experience that again. It is your wedding day that is supposed to be the happiest day of your life, but in fact, is there in fact any more joyful celebration, and any occasion more worth celebrating, than a golden wedding?