

In the course of a long, scripturally rich blessing at the end of the wedding ceremony when the guests' tummies are starting to rumble and all are awaiting the ceremonial exit, there is a little, usually overlooked gem which expresses the formula for a happy marriage. The priest says:

*"May he (the groom) put his trust in her (the bride) and recognise that she is his equal and the heir with him to the life of grace."*

Wonderful words.

Some people might think it rich that the Church proclaims a woman's equality in the wedding service but advocates a woman's subjugation at all other times. After all, did we not hear a few weeks ago that wives must submit to their husbands? We certainly did though that text from Ephesians has been as misunderstood as the first reading we heard today. As we saw those few weeks ago, the Ephesians text is carefully balanced to say that both partners must serve each other; act as Christ towards each other.

The passage from Genesis seems to say that women are inferior to men, after all they were made as an after-thought, from a part of man; clearly second rate, second hand, second in all respects.

Except that the passage does not give that message. Although written in a highly patriarchal society when women were second in all respects to men the sacred author is saying something astonishingly different.

Adam is not at home in the paradise, the walled-garden, God has provided for him. He is lonely, incomplete. He needs a partner. All the animals are examined to see whether a suitable mate can be found among them. The man names them all, showing his mastery over them and showing that he is exercising his stewardship, working for God in whose image and likeness he has been made. But no animal is up to the task of being Adam's soul-mate. He needs someone in his image and likeness as he is made in God's image and likeness. He does not need a subservient inferior, nor a clone, nor a twin; he needs a compliment, someone who will complete him not compete with him. The Rabbis would later say that woman was not brought forth from the head of man lest she be cleverer than him; nor was she brought forth from his feet lest he trample over her. She was taken from his side so that she would be his equal. This is what God provides. Woman, in the story, is formed from man's side; that is to say, she is his equal, flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone. The same but different; different but equal. Together they form humankind.

Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and the two become one. That phrase is the most often repeated phrase in the Bible - and it is curious. In this society a man did not leave his father and mother to join his wife. The bride was taken from her father's house to his father's house where they would live. So the leave-taking is not a change of location. It must then be another form of departure - a psychological

departure. Father and mother are no longer to be his primary concern. His first priority is to be his wife. The Scripture gives an ideal, ever to be striven for if seldom achieved.

For that was not how things were. Marriages were not love-matches. They were arranged, negotiated by the fathers, who in most cases would be brothers and the couple would be first cousins and so the wealth of the family, the dowry, was not exported but retained within the wider family group.

That a husband's first concern should be his wife is a commonplace to us, but it was unthinkable in this culture. What the inspired writer was writing was something running against the customs of his own people, but pointing to a new, then inconceivable, way of looking at the marital relationship. This is Inspiration at work.

Going against the received wisdom of the day, overturning the accepted ways of thinking was a speciality of Jesus. He does it again in today's Gospel. Whether or not divorce was to be allowed was not an issue for anyone in the first century in Palestine. The matter had been settled a long time before. A man could divorce his wife. But the wife could not divorce her husband. It was a one way street. In Evangelist-Mark's Gentile community women had the right to divorce but this was not the case in the Jewish world.

However, there was an issue concerning divorce which was a live issue at this time as two major schools of thought disagreed. The followers of R.Hillel, a great teacher who lived a little before the time of Christ, accepted the teaching of their master that a man could divorce his wife for any reason - that he did not find her pretty enough, that she just didn't please him any more, anything. The disciples of Hillel's contemporary, R.Shammai, took their master's view that divorce could be given only for the gravest of reasons, namely, adultery. So the Pharisees who ask the question are wanting to know whose side Jesus is on - knowing that he will alienate the other group whichever way he opts.

Jesus answers the question full on. Well, actually he (typically) answers the question with a question first and then answers it full on. Divorce is wrong. And he justifies his, very-unpopular-with-men, answer by quoting Scripture and giving it a new interpretation: woman is not second and inferior - the two become one united by God and so indivisible.

Jesus did many remarkable things and said many astonishing things. Few of his words would have astonished his audience more than what he had to say about marriage and divorce. It ran against all that was accepted - by men. His stance defends women. They could be divorced on whim, and thereby disgraced, and sent back to their father's house, if there was still a father's house, their lives wrecked. Women never had a voice. Their man was their voice. No man, no voice. No voice, no hope.

So the issue in the Gospel is as much about fair play to women as it is about divorce.

The Church's view on divorce is well known; **and** well misunderstood. Divorce is a tragedy. Few come out of divorce unharmed, and some emerge permanently scarred.

Children are especially vulnerable. It is poignant for us that the teaching about children is repeated at the close of the passage about divorce. Divorce is always sad; but it is not in itself sinful. What causes a divorce and what results will probably involve sin, but divorce *per se* is not sinful and may at times actually be necessary. Being separated or divorced does not bar anyone from the sacraments. An important thing to do, if this happens, is come and talk about it.

I have been saying this for more than thirty years to try to repair injustices and assuage ignorances but people still have wrong ideas from which they draw erroneous conclusions. Often, I'm afraid, because of what they have heard from a priest. Divorce is always deeply sad, but, in itself, is not an excommunication.

I have no idea what it is like to be married. I go to sleep with a book and I wake to the *Today* Programme. No doubt at times marriage is the most wonderful thing imaginable. Sometimes it might be hell on earth. Always, to be successful, it must be hard work. When each gives way to the other as Christ served the Church, it should be heavenly; when "he (the husband) puts his trust in her (the wife) and recognises that she is his equal and the heir with him to the life of grace", and she does so too.