Homily: 27th Sunday in Ord. Time (B)

Gen. 2:18-24; Heb. 2:9-11 & Mk. 10:2-16

It is not often we hear that passage from Genesis c.2 which was our first reading today. I suspect that most of us, if asked about the biblical creation narrative, would think immediately of the great “Hymn of Creation” we read in Genesis 1, that great hymn with its response “And evening came, and morning came, the first day” which we hear each year at the opening of the Easter Vigil. Compared to that familiar text, today’s reading seems a bit of a “poor relation”, and yet it is far, far older. The more “scientific” account, the “day by day” story of Creation seems to arise in the last period of the editing of the OT, after the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BC, and echoes much of the early science of that great nation, concluding with the creation of Man and Woman together “in His image and likeness” as the pinnacle of God’s work. Today’s text was probably written down around 1000 BC, possibly at King Solomon’s court, although the story itself may be much older. It gives us a very different view. Rather than coming last, as the culmination of all living things, here the Man is formed first and the other creatures are then produced. It is rather a beautiful image – if a little more like the “Jungle Book” version of a creation myth. God presents all creation to this new Man to see what he would call each one, reflecting the ancient theology that, somehow, a name captures the essence of a thing in a way nothing else can. Yet after all this, something is still missing – for there is no suitable “helpmate” for the Man. And so God continues to work, and in this account it is Woman who is the pinnacle of Creation, the last and greatest product of his imagination, the only part of Creation which truly answers the Man’s need – it is this Woman who calls forth Adam’s exultant exclamation.

Of course, it is just a story – and one which many have read in perhaps a less positive sense than the one I have just presented. It is just a story – as the Biblical editors have always realised, since they left the two opposing narratives back-to-back in Genesis. But it is a story which is more than a story – for it belongs to the group of texts, the so-called aetiological myths, which seek to explain and understand the way the world is experienced, seek to explore the deep reasons which underlie our experience of creatureliness, of evil, of love and of death.

There are three things which struck me in this little story. The first is the immense care and concern which God shows in his creative work. This new being, the Man he first creates, is alone – and God knows that that “aloneness” is not good. From that recognition springs all the wealth and diversity of living things, yet still they are not sufficient. Only Woman, she who is formed of the same stuff as Man, she who alone bears the image and likeness of God as he does, will answer his need. Only in her can he see both God and himself reflected truly. Alongside this immense care and concern is the fact that, in this narrative, God seems very, very close – he is the God who “gets his hands dirty”, as it were, in the messy business of creation. He is not the aloof deity of the pagans, distant and
unseen. He is not the deity even of Genesis 1, whose creation is by divine word alone. Rather, he is the God of the Garden, the God of mud and breath and flesh and bone – and our stewardship of that first garden and its animals was only a reflection, a shadow of his own divine stewardship. Lastly, he is the God who delights in making things “complete” – by answering Man’s need for community, he reflects that deep and complete inner community which is the core of his own being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Perhaps those three insights give us something of a context within which to hear Jesus’ words in the Gospel. The Jesus we see in this passage has a lot on his mind. A few days before this, at least as Mark records, he has been transfigured, and has been given a new insight into the path which his life must take, a new vision of his own future. Twice since then, he has spoken to his friends about his coming suffering and death, even if they have not understood his words. He is a man whose mind is fixed on eternity, on the true goals of life. And this is the point where the Pharisees, one of those groups who will work to bring about his death, choose to pick a fight with him. As Mark puts it so laconically when they question him about divorce – “they were testing him” – effectively asking him to choose one side in a long-running dispute in Judaism between the “hard-liners” who rejected divorce, and those “liberals” who accepted Moses’ teaching in Deuteronomy 24. Jesus knows it is, in a sense, their dispute and not his, knows they are far more interested in legalistic word-play than in the complexity of human relationships, and so gives them an answer they cannot dispute, since it goes back to the very dawn of God’s plan, way back beyond Moses’ command, an answer that calls them back to that first ideal of human communion and community we see in Genesis. More than that, he goes on to criticise the Pharisees themselves. That little comment he makes on Moses’ words: “it was because you were so unteachable” is perhaps better translated in the RSV: “it was because of your hardness of heart...” calling the Pharisees to remember that perennial sin of Israel from the Exodus onwards, that constant hardness of heart which led them to forget God’s deeds, to forget God’s love towards them, to constantly forget their duty of love towards each other, their duty to echo in their own lives the divine love and mercy they have received.

Perhaps Jesus’ teaching – not only in public to the disputing Pharisees but also repeated in private to his own disciples – can seem harsh, idealistic, inflexible in our modern and secular age. Perhaps we would like to brush it under the carpet, pretend he never said it, play it down so as not to offend sensitivities in our rather squeamish 21st century. Actually, I don’t think we can. I think Jesus is offering us a deep insight into all forms of committed human life – whether in the sacramental bonds of matrimony or ordination, or the vowed life of religious. If those forms of life are to fulfil their purpose in building true communion and community, then all will require patience, forbearance, hard-work, true and not shallow love and commitment and – perhaps above all – self-sacrifice. There are no short cuts, no easy answers, just as Jesus knew there was to be no escape from the Cross.

But I think there is something else, equally important, to bear in mind. Jesus is not like the Pharisees. He does not set rules for the sake of setting rules. Again and again in the portrait of Jesus we see from the four Evangelists, we find that the Jesus who condemns sin,
who names sin for what it is, who points to the consequences of sin, is the *same* Jesus who does not condemn *sinners*. The Jesus who condemns adultery in today’s gospel is the *same* Jesus who does not condemn the sinful woman at the well in Samaria, the same Jesus who refuses to condemn the woman caught in the very act of adultery in John 8, the same Jesus who defends the repentant prostitute who pours tears and ointment on his feet and wipes them with her hair (Lk.7:36-50).

And in this he is his Father’s Son. The God who created us, and who created us for communion and community, is the God of the Garden, the God who gets his hands dirty with the messiness of mud and blood and bone. The God who comes to us in Christ is that same God, that same God of the Garden, who *re*-fashions us by getting *his* hands dirty too, dirty with the messiness of our failed relationships, our misguided, selfish and ill-motivated loving – ultimately to the point of having those hands smashed in broken bone and spattered blood by the nails that pierced them. Our God is not apart from our brokenness, but there in its centre, waiting for us to meet him there. Our God does not want us to be alone, just as he did not want Adam to be alone, but calls us again and again in his mercy to share our lives fully with Him and with each other. And perhaps – as we taste that mercy for ourselves in this Eucharist, in whatever way we most need to – we too will come to that child-like love and trust which will allow us to enter His Kingdom. Amen.

3.10.15