

The theme for our morning's meditation is 'The family: husband and wife'. In Mark's gospel some Pharisees come to Jesus and test him by asking a question whether it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus asks them about what Moses had commanded them. The Pharisees replied that Moses had permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away. Jesus replied that it was because of the hardness of their hearts that Moses wrote this law, 'but at the beginning of creation God made them male and female and for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together let no one separate.' Rather than answering the question of divorce, Jesus talks to them about the original plan and purpose of God's creation. He reminds the Pharisees that marriage was meant to be monogamous and lifelong. The text that Jesus refers to is Genesis 1:27 which was also linked with Genesis 2:24 in popular exegesis to show that marriage was meant to be monogamous.

After bringing together these two texts, Jesus now presses for something more: that marriage should be life-long. Jesus' final statement is: 'Those whom God has joined let no man separate.' The word 'separate' is a standard term meaning 'to divorce'. God has brought the husband and wife together in a covenant relationship which is meant to be life-long. The imperative 'let no one separate', implies that it is possible for couples to separate but they are being commanded by Jesus to keep their marriage vows and not to break-up the marriage in which God has joined them together. Jesus' answer indicates that it is sin to break marriage vows by separating what God has brought together.

Jesus also declared the Mosaic provision of divorce to be a concession because of the hardness of their hearts and their sinfulness. To Jesus's first answer they retort saying 'Why then did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away? Jesus replied, 'Moses permitted you to divorce your wife because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for sexual immorality and marries another woman commits adultery' (Matthew 19:8-9). The Rabbis error in interpretation lay in their understanding of Deuteronomy 24:1 which reads: *If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house.....* They converted Moses permission into a command. What was meant to be a concession to human sin and to limit its evil effects was not to be taken as an approval of divorce. Cranfield says, 'Human conduct which falls short of the absolute command of God is sin and stands under divine judgment. The provision which God's mercy has designed for the limitation of the consequences of human sin must not be interpreted as divine approval of sinning. When our sinfulness traps us in a position in which all the choices still open to us are

evil, we are to choose that which is less evil asking for God's forgiveness and being comforted by it, but not pretending that evil is good.'

In Jesus teaching we notice that he upholds the life-long commitment of marriage. Jesus goes back to the Creation account and teaches three important steps for a marriage to work. The first step is that a man will have to leave his mother and his father. Leaving one's family is an important step for any individual to step out into marriage. Leaving one's parents means a change of priority. It means the husband is now to consider his wife as first priority over his parents. Just like a baby's umbilical cord is cut so that the baby can grow independently after nine months in the mother's womb, so also the man must leave his parents to make this new unit independent. The second point that Jesus makes is that he is to be united with his wife. There is a joining together of these two as a new unit sealed by God's covenant law. Finally, they are to be one flesh. Sexual union is God's good plan for marriage and is to be celebrated in this context.

In our world today there are numerous relationships which are breaking down. God calls Christian couples to love one another deeply that they may be examples for the world. Love is the only factor that will make any marriage work. It is not a love which is here on one day and then fades away on another. It is a love which is an outflow of God's sacrificial love. May we truly reflect that sacrificial love in our family relationships.