

Homily For Friday of the 19th Week of Ordinary Time- Year 1

St Peter's 8:30 AM Mass - August 13, 2021

Joshua 24:1-13 "Long ago your ancestors served other gods ... Now you live in towns you did not build."

Psalms 136:1-24 "Give thanks to God who gave their land as a heritage and rescued us."

Matthew 19:3-12 "He made them male and female, and the two shall become one flesh."

A Permanent Reason To Give Thanks

Introduction

A few years ago, my wife and I were asked to be presenters for a marriage preparation program. This program is a required element for engaged couples seeking sacramental marriage in the Catholic Church. Yes, there are still couples wanting the sacrament. The challenge is to make sense of the freedom to enter into a permanent faithful marriage open to children. Part of our training was to observe other couples making these presentations. At one point, we were introduced as observers to the couples in the room. The coordinator of the program gave our names and happened to mention that we had been married for forty years. I still remember to this day that there was a kind of audible gasp in the room. In that moment, I realized that, today, even couples coming to the Church for the sacrament don't know how lifelong faithful marriage is possible.

Matthew

Today's Gospel passage has the Pharisees testing Jesus again. If they can trick him into contradicting Moses, he will lose his credibility as a Messiah. The question is whether divorce is lawful in some circumstances. Underlying the question are two deeper ones. Is marriage a covenant relationship reflecting God's faithfulness? And, can such a covenant relationship be broken? As usual, the Pharisees have hostile intent, but Jesus makes it about God's plan from the beginning and about justice.

There were two Pharisaic schools of thought. One was that a man could divorce his wife for infidelity or immorality. The liberal view was that he could do the

same even for a trivial matter of burning dinner. So, there is a serious question of justice since only the husband had this option.

But Jesus makes the whole question about God. First, God's plan for man and woman is built into their natures from the beginning. Second, marriage is to reflect God's own faithfulness. Jesus goes on to say that Moses gave an exception because people are hard hearted and are unwilling to love like God.

I remember a sad situation with a co-worker years ago. He and his wife had suffered a family tragedy. Months later, he told me that they were splitting up. He said that they just couldn't find a way to support each other through it all. To my question about whether they could turn to God for the grace to help each other get through, he only indicated that there was no way this would happen. They were in a wilderness with no help.

Moses had lowered the level of moral expectation for a people who had shown themselves too stubborn to live by the Lord's high standards. With his words, Jesus makes himself history's greatest defender of the sanctity and permanence of marriage. But now the disciples come into the conversation. That's too hard. It's better not to get married. It sounds a lot like the camel going through the eye of the needle all over again. Who then can be saved, they had asked. Jesus had said that for humans, it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.

The word grace does not appear in these verses, but the idea that God can enable men and women to fulfill this exalted vocation is built into the discussion. Only when the Lord enriches our lives with his grace can the ideal of marriage for life become the real experience of men and women joined together as one flesh.

A celibate life in total service to God is an alternative, but that's not easier and is only for those called to that life and way of serving God.

Joshua

You may have noticed that the weekday first readings are taking us at quite a clip through the Old Testament. In the book of Joshua, the people of Israel are now in the land of the promise. God has been faithful through an incredibly twisted road,

from Abraham to Egypt, to freedom from slavery, to the wilderness, and finally into the land of promise. The biggest obstacle has been their own stubborn refusal to be faithful to God. But Joshua, who has led them after the death of Moses, in his farewell address to the leaders of the people, is reminding them of all that God has done, the one true God who has joined himself to them despite their unfaithfulness.

It's one of the greatest speeches of all time, even better than Shakespeare. It is interesting that Joshua includes the specific incident where King Balak is worried about the Israelites and asks the prophet Balaam to curse them, but God will only provide a blessing for Balaam to proclaim. I chose you and these are the things I have done for you.

Tomorrow, in the second half of this passage, Joshua will invite the people to renew their covenant to the Lord and to make a choice, the same choice before you and I today. Will you serve the gods of the land, and there are many open to us today, or will you serve the Lord God who is faithful? You must choose. But when you do, consider God's everlasting faithfulness to his great plan of salvation.

Call To Action

Our main action today is to recognize the depth of God's faithfulness. As the psalmist says, God's love is everlasting. It is from all time and for all time. This may seem impossible, either because we think of God as angry or because we are aware of our own sinfulness. But this is exactly what God wants us to know. It is precisely because of our hard heartedness and our limited capacity for total commitment that we must renew our confidence in the faithfulness of God. Otherwise our own faithfulness to each other in marriage or in any relationship will, indeed, be impossible. However, with God, all things are possible.

Key Scripture Passages

Entrance Antiphon: *Let us bow low before the God who made us, for he is the Lord our God.*

Collect: *Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care that relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace, they may be defended always by your protection.*

Joshua: *Joshua gathered all of Israel and said to the people, "Long ago your ancestors served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham and made his offspring many. Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt and brought you out. They pursued and when they cried out to the Lord, he made the sea come upon them. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness a long time. The Amorites fought with you, and I handed them over to you. Then King Balak set out to fight against Israel. He sent Balaam to curse you, but I would not listen to him. Therefore, he blessed you. When you went over the Jordan, it was not by your sword or bow. I gave you a land on which you had not laboured, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olives that you did not plant.*

Psalms: *O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. O give thanks to the God of gods. O give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to God who led his people through the wilderness. Give thanks to God who gave their land as a heritage and rescued us from our foes, for his steadfast love endures.*

Matthew: *Some Pharisees came to Jesus, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" Jesus answered, "At the beginning he made them male and female, and said, for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and the two shall become one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. Jesus said, "It was because you were so hard hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery." His disciples said to him, "If such is the case, it is better not to marry." Jesus said, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given.*