Fr Peter Newsam – Midhurst & Petworth – West Sussex

Homily for The Twenty Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)(07/10/18)

How do the Pharisees see Jesus? How does he look to them? This is a really important question because it helps us to understand what will happen later on in the Gospels; they give us an insight into the answer in today's story. The Pharisees ask Jesus a question to test him: will he dare to contradict Moses?

The Pharisees are in effective control of the religious life of the nation. They are the dominant party within Judaism at the time, and they are the effective guardians of what is acceptable and what is not. The problem that they have with Jesus is that he refuses to accept their control. He will not be controlled by them, and their increasingly desperate attempts to bring him under control are proving unsuccessful. They live in a world of rules and regulations, and as masters of the rules and regulations they are masters of that world. Jesus acts like a man from another world, a world which does not ask first 'have you followed the rules' but 'has your heart been converted?'. It is not that the rules do not matter to him, they matter very much, but only as an expression of conversion. Rule-keeping without conversion is sterile and unproductive.

The Pharisees try to draw Jesus into their world, the world where they have power, but he declines to join them. He doesn't want to talk about rules, he wants to talk about God's plan.

The basic relationship, from which all relationships in the created world draw their meaning, is The Trinity, God himself, a constant relationship of dynamic self-gift and total love. Because the Trinity is an expression of unity that is perfect, God has a deep desire for unity. It is always God's will to bring people together, never to drive them apart. Goodness and virtue bring people together; sin and selfishness drive them apart. We can see this in our friendships and our families: being together makes us feel good, because it is part of what God plans for us; being separated or in conflict feels bad, because it is not what God designed us for.

When Jesus speaks in today's Gospel, he declines to enter into the Pharisees' world of what is allowed and what is forbidden. Instead he talks about the mind of God, the intentions of God, the dreams of God. It is almost a different language, and it is one the Pharisees have no power to control.

Jesus begins his answer to the Pharisees question from a different direction. They start from 'What is allowed? He starts from 'What is God like?' God is a Trinity, of his very essence he is about integration, about bringing together. Human beings, made in his image, are also in their very nature designed for unity, for communion, for integration. First of all human beings are created so that they are most truly themselves when they are united with God. All the things about me that are fake, or damaging, or somehow constructed by the values of this day rather than the values of eternity are burned away and I can just be me. I

will never be more truly myself than when I am united with God, and nor will you. But human beings, made in God's image, are created for integration, for communion, for being close rather than being apart, not just in their relationship with God, but also in their relationships with one another. We are called, all of us, to fruitful and life-giving friendships that depend on generosity and self-gift. But many of us are also called to something even deeper: to a relationship so close that the maleness in me and the femaleness in my wife complement and strengthen and magnify one another. That is the call to marriage: a state which, in God's plan, allows both husband and wife to become more than they could ever have been had they remained unmarried.

The plan of God is that, just as he expresses his deepest nature in relationship, in love, in gift, so do we. Through the sacred bond of marriage we become someone we could not have been without it. This is a beautiful truth, and it is transformative. It transforms the lives of the couple who are married, but it also transforms the lives of the people around them, because a real relationship of self-gift, a real plunging into the adventure of complementarity and self-offering, can only ever be fruitful and life-giving.

Of course, not everyone's experience of married life fits in with this picture. Human sinfulness always has the capacity to obscure our true nature, and bad decisions can lead us down blind alleys. But the truth about marriage is that, when all goes according to plan, it is an adventure of giving and receiving that leads a couple deeper and deeper into the reality of what they might become. The strength of a couple who have made real the divine dream of integration, of radical togetherness, is one of the building blocks of a sound society. It depends on this stability. Marriage is tasked with saving the world! Listen to this description of an old married couple from American novelist Annie Dillard:

> 'They enfolded each other and looked over each other's shoulders at the world's wreck where all shattered, at bareness they held at bay. Or they cradled the world between them like a mortally sick child, loving it and not telling it all they knew. Now in compassion they bore, between them, their solitudes each the size of the ravelled globe.' (*The Maytrees*, quoted in Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis 'Fire of Mercy, Heart of The World' volume III p.82)

This Gospel reading is not really a reading about divorce, it is a reading about marriage. It is a reading about Divine Love, about God's constant drive to bring together and to bind together, to unite what is separate. It is a reading about the fruitfulness of self-gift, about the way in which a couple who increasingly open themselves up to one another also open themselves up to the world. It is a story about the way in which not only does making a gift of ourselves change us and change the world, but learning to receive, with awe and wonder, with astonishment and delight, the love and self-gift of another, can also change us and change the world. The Pharisees begin with rules, the Lord begins with dreams.