

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Genesis 2:18-24

Psalm 127

Hebrews 2:9-11

Mark 10:2-16

Well, this is poignant stuff in our Gospel passage. Who of us here has not been affected by the pain of divorce, either within our own family, or amongst our close friends? I know my family has. It is a unique pain, which can take a long time to heal. So this is not just theoretical stuff that Jesus is talking about. And despite this, he is speaking in rather stark terms, as he did on many occasions.

This, I think, raises an important principle that we should always keep in mind – namely, that God only ever says “No” for the sake of a greater “Yes”. *God only ever says “No” for the sake of a greater “Yes”*. In this case, the great “Yes” is the immense dignity of marriage that Jesus upholds against those who would make it something more trivial or temporary.

But this is certainly not the only instance in which our Lord drew clear boundaries and spoke challenging words. And he did this not just to be mean, but rather, so as to call people up to the fulness of life they’ve always longed for. In other words, he wasn’t just challenging people, he was also encouraging them – encouraging them to live up to the great dignity that God made them for.

For reasons perhaps known only to God himself, I have been called to serve him in this time and place as the parish priest here in Armadale. We all have a share in Christ’s priesthood through our baptism—which is a point I will return to shortly—but I have been entrusted with a particular role here which, as you might appreciate, is a sometimes-daunting task.

In my own preaching, I realise that I’m not always as frank as Jesus is! I’m conscious of the historical baggage that some Catholics have regarding the fire-and-brimstone preaching of some clergy in the past, and I always strive to be charitable, even when issuing a challenge from the ambo, though I freely admit that this is an area in which I’ve perhaps been too cautious at times, and for that I apologise. (I understand that Fr Grant is not as hesitant to preach on challenging topics as I sometimes am!)

So, in the spirit of Jesus’ willingness to both challenge and encourage his flock, and in acknowledgement of the fact that I have been here a bit over five years now, I thought it would be appropriate to offer some words today on a few aspects of our day-to-day parish life that I think merit some attention. I will speak in a general way, and I’ll let you decide if any of what I say might apply to you or not. And my apologies at the outset if I preach slightly longer than normal this morning (it won’t be 30 minutes, I promise!).

I should also note that I'm addressing this to Mass-going Catholics. I would likely word some of this a bit differently for those Catholics who barely ever come to Mass, but you're the ones who happen to be here today!

--

Now, as you know, we have the tradition in our Church of calling priests "Father", which I think is a beautiful tradition. At our best, we priests are called to be an image of the loving heart of God the Father, whom Jesus came to reveal once and for all.

That said, I'm well aware that many folks have what you might call "father issues" due to past experiences with father figures in their lives, and sometimes these experiences can colour their interactions with or perceptions of their priests. I'm also aware that some people have had bad experiences with priests over the years, and I don't just mean the horrible stuff we've had to see in the news in recent years.

Believe it or not, this is part of why I wear the collar pretty-much all the time. It's certainly not intended as a status symbol or a power-trip – Lord knows there isn't much glory or status associated with the priesthood in our day and age! For me, it first-of-all acts as a witness – a reminder to folks, for instance, that we priests still exist. And the very fact of our existence can prompt big-picture questions among some folks when they encounter us. It's also a witness to the fact that we priests fundamentally represent something bigger than ourselves.

When people ask to discuss something difficult with me, or ask me for a blessing, or ask me to give the last rites to a loved one, they don't want "Mark" to do it – they want a priest, a representative of Christ and his Church to do it. If I meet with someone—maybe someone who's had bad experiences with priests or the Church in the past— the fact that I'm visibly identifiable as a priest means that if, with the Lord's help, we have a good encounter, then maybe something of their notion of priests can be healed in the process, or something of their understanding of the Church, or indeed something of their understanding of God.

And you too have a share in this power when you interact with friends or family or neighbours or work colleagues or schoolmates. If they know you are Catholic, and they find you to be respectful and honest and good-hearted, they too may have some of their baggage about the faith healed through your witness to them. But be aware that the opposite is also true, hence our need to strive to grow in charity towards all.

As an aside, I also wear the collar for the accountability it offers. It's a little bit like a wedding ring in that sense. If a married person sees a good-looking member of the opposite sex walking down the street, they might be tempted to check them out, but the public sign of their wedding ring reminds them of the promises they've made and the greater "Yes" underlying them. In a similar way, someone might cut me off in traffic, and I might be tempted to give them a bit of what-for, but the collar quickly reminds that that would look pretty bad!

We priests and deacons are given the authority to preach, not because we're clever or have a way with words, but because we've been called by Christ and his Church to break open the Lord's Word for our people. People don't want to hear our opinions from the ambo, or about what we got up to on the weekend – they want to hear the saving message of Jesus. Yes, we can sometimes relate that to episodes from our own lives when appropriate, but the preacher isn't meant to be the centre of attention, Jesus is.

I know for myself, being called “Father” helps remind me of what I've said “yes” to, and of the significant responsibilities I've been entrusted with by the Lord and his Church. We had the concept of “spiritual fatherhood” drilled into us during my time in seminary, but it really became a tangible thing for me once I was ordained a priest, especially since for my first year of priesthood I was back in Rome finishing my post-graduate studies. Even though I'd only had a few brief parish placements beforehand, as a priest I suddenly felt acutely the distance between myself and the people that I had been ordained to serve, such that I was very eager to get back to the diocese. And I can say without a doubt that the hardest thing I've had to do as a priest—which I've had to do twice now—is to move parish... because spiritual fatherhood is real, and we become part of the family.

Now, occasionally some Catholics will try to develop what you might call a “special relationship” with one or more of their priests. I'm not talking about sexual advances, which are thankfully very rare, but more a kind of emotional attachment that goes beyond a regular priest-parishioner relationship. Maybe they're recently widowed, or divorced, or simply a bit lonely (which, let's face it, is probably all of us), and without realising it they might try to make of their priest a kind of emotional partner, filling the void that a spouse or someone else used to take. This might involve excessive sharing or excessive seeking of time or attention, and so forth. Other people might see their priest as essentially being a means of getting free therapy or counselling on a regular basis. Neither of these are appropriate.

Don't get me wrong – I'm certainly not trying to put anyone off if they need some spiritual guidance, or if they need to discuss something serious, or if they want to invite me around for a cuppa or a meal from time to time. I can't always say “yes” to the latter, but I try when I can.

But a priest can't have a “special” relationship with a select few parishioners to the detriment of everyone else. And we can't be everyone's first port-of-call if they just want to vent about something. We are called to be Father for everyone in the parish, including those who don't come to Mass. Yes, we'll likely spend more time with some people than others—the parish staff, key volunteers, etc.—but our heart is to be available for all, not just a few.

Okay. Well, what I've been leading up to in all this is that if I am "Father", that doesn't make you all children. Let me say that again! Just because I am "Father", that doesn't make you all children. It's somewhat comparable to those of you who are parents – as your children grow into adulthood, you're still their mother or father, but you relate with them now on an adult level.

As I alluded to at the outset, we all have a share in the priesthood of Christ through our baptism, and we all have our part to play in the Church's mission in our time and place. And while this has always been the case, and has always been the Church's teaching, there have perhaps been times in our history when it's *seemed* like the laity were essentially relegated to being spiritual children, where their only task was to "pay, pray and obey".

I think at least part of what the worldwide Church is trying to discern together during the current synod gathering in Rome is how we can better encourage all of the faithful to see themselves as adult believers (rather than spiritual children), and what that means for how they live out their faith in the various situations of their lives.

So I would make that perhaps the key takeaway from my homily today: **we are all adults, and we are all Christians.** We are all adults, and we are all Christians. And so the question becomes, what does it mean for us to act as adults towards each other, and to honour each other as fellow disciples of the Lord?

If nothing else, it surely means that we are called to act with basic charity towards each other – that charity which we owe every person created by God, but particularly those who are brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Part of this is that, when we disagree with someone on something, or we might not understand where they are coming from, we ought to do our best to presume good will on the part of the other person... to presume that they're acting with good intentions, even if we disagree with them... to not dismiss the common faith they share with us, nor our shared human dignity. In this, we can offer a great counter-witness to the "comment-section warfare" that has so pervaded our culture, and which is so quick to deride and cut-down others at the first sign of disagreement.

In a similar way, we priests shouldn't be expected to litigate every little dispute that arises with the parish. Even our Lord didn't presume to take such a role upon himself, despite the efforts of some of his followers. Again, we are all adults, and we are all disciples. Yes, the parish priest needs to stay informed of things, and if some deeper trouble is brewing, he certainly shouldn't be the last to hear about it, but part of being an adult is that—for more trivial things at least—we don't have to run off to "Daddy" every time some small problem comes up.

--

Related to this is the fact that not everything worth doing here needs to be done by a priest or deacon, or by the parish staff, or indeed by a bishop or pope. Again, there have been times when the culture in some of our parishes has been one of deferring all things great-and-small to the clergy; of waiting for Father to do something or else it doesn't get done. I know this was often done out of respect, but the needs of our time and our bustling parish require more than what we clergy and our parish staff can do by ourselves.

Let me offer a fine example from our own parish. A couple of years ago, two young women in our parish approached me with the idea of us hosting a young adults dance. They had seen it work well elsewhere, and they thought it could be a fun, healthy opportunity for young Catholics in the area to meet others and have a good time. They were happy to organise it, and I was happy for us to support it as best as we could. We've since had two of these events, and they've both been a great success. Significantly, while they kept me in the loop, the idea didn't start with me or the parish office, neither did we do the bulk of the organising.

And so for those of you who perhaps come to Mass each week but aren't particularly engaged in the parish beyond that, I would encourage you to consider the possibility that the Lord might want to use you for something more.

Yes, we depend upon the financial assistance of our people, and if you don't regularly support the parish in this way, please take that question to prayer at some time (a reminder that our First Collection supports the priests, and the Second Collection supports the parish). But just as important are the various ways you can make an offering of love with your time or energy or expertise to help build up the Lord's Kingdom in this place. I realise that many of you have young families, busy jobs, etc., but know that our Lord is never outdone in generosity, and involvement in this way has a way of rebounding blessings into other areas of your life.

If you feel an inspiration that the Lord might be leading you to try something (maybe a Bible study, maybe a social event, maybe something else entirely), don't hesitate to let us know, and we'll support you as best we can. A parish of our size and with folks from so many different backgrounds has so much potential to have all kinds of different things going on that don't necessarily start from myself or the parish office. Alternatively, we have plenty of established groups and activities that could provide a way for you to serve God and the parish in some meaningful way.

And on that note, I would likewise encourage our established volunteers to be open to the sometimes-surprising promptings of the Holy Spirit in your respective ministries of service. Guard against the all-too-human tendency to slip into always doing things the same way just because that's how it's always been done, or inadvertently treating a ministry as though it were your own personal turf, something that you have a right to own or control.

On the other hand, I would ask all of you to never forget the immense generosity offered by some of our volunteers over many years. None of us are perfect, and our volunteers will occasionally make mistakes—as will I—but, again, please presume good will, and try to treat each other as adults and as fellow children of God.

--

Of course, front-and-centre in our parish life is the celebration of the liturgy, which the Second Vatican Council called “the source and summit” of our Christian life.

My sincere thanks to so many who help in many ways before, during and after our weekly—and indeed daily—celebrations of the Eucharist. And my sincere thanks to so many who help maintain a prayerful environment in the church during Mass, as well as before and after Mass.

I realise that part of what we’re about as a parish is fostering community, but I would ask those of you who want to have an extended chat with friends before or after Mass to please do so in the foyer or outside so as to enable others to pray in the church if they wish. And of course, please remember to turn off or silence your phones during the liturgy.

Having said that, our desire to maintain a prayerful environment should not be seen as excluding the many children who so enrich our parish and who are the future of our Church. Parents, know that a bit of noise from your children certainly does not upset me, and if anyone ever makes you feel unwelcome or demands that you go to the family room, please let me know. You are of course welcome to pop out at times if you feel you should, but please do come back when you’re ready.

I also know that getting children ready for Mass can have its challenges as well, so it’s no major drama if you’re running a bit late from time to time. But for anyone who finds that they consistently arrive several minutes late each week, I would ask you to consider if perhaps an adjustment in the amount of time you allow to get ready would be possible.

Of course, the Eucharist is a gift—indeed, the greatest gift we have been given—and those in communion with our Lord and his Church are invited and encouraged to receive it *as a gift*. None of us can claim to deserve it, or to have earned it. And we should always be mindful of Saint Paul’s warning that, to receive it in a foolhardy manner, if we are not appropriately prepared, is to risk consuming our own condemnation.

Again, this is not to discourage anyone from presenting themselves for Holy Communion if the Lord is calling them to. But always remember that it’s a gift. None of us have a “right” to Holy Communion. Similarly, none of us have a right to distribute it. This too is a gift, and for those of us called to holy orders, an immense responsibility.

Now I'm aware that the need for Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion during Mass has been significantly reduced since we've stopped offering the Precious Blood at Mass (which leads to some improvising at times during Mass if we need an extra minister), though there is still a need for Extraordinary Ministers to take Holy Communion to the sick and homebound on a regular basis, and I thank all those who help in this regard.

I might just note here that, even though it was the Covid restrictions that necessitated the stopping of the distribution of the Precious Blood at Mass, I was actually leaning towards doing something along those lines even before Covid came along. Given that we're such a large parish, we needed so many full chalices, such that there was always a danger of spillage, and the inability to reserve unconsumed Precious Blood in the tabernacle was a constant concern.

Our theology has always affirmed that Jesus is fully present in each Eucharistic species, as we say, so we can be assured that we're not missing out on any Jesus if we only receive the host. (The priest, on the other hand, has to consecrate and receive both species in order for it to be a valid Mass). I would remind you that for almost all of our Church's history this has been the way of it.

But I would also note that, spiritually speaking, if we have a spiritual hunger or spiritual thirst that is not fully satisfied in this life, that's not the worst thing in the world. Our union with God will always be imperfect in this life—it will always be both *now* and *not yet*—and this is good for us, because this hunger and thirst in us motivates us to strive to be better prepared for the perfect union with God that we have been made for. At St Augustine so famously said, our hearts will always have this restlessness, until they finally rest in God.

- -

Lastly, I'm aware that there are probably some folks here who live a little bit disjointed with the Church, a little bit “one foot in; one foot out”. You come to Mass, but you perhaps take issue with some of the Church's teachings or practices. Maybe it's the hot-button moral issues around life and sexuality, or maybe it's the social teachings on a preference for the poor or non-violence, or maybe it's some of our theological beliefs about God or our Lady or the sacraments.

I certainly know that I was like that for a while on some things as I started to make my way back into the Church. I would just note that, for me, the key moment came when I realised that the perspective with which I was judging the Church on these things wasn't the objective point-of-view I thought it was, but rather had been formed by an assortment of forces within our culture, not all of which are particularly good or healthy.

And as I opened myself to the possibility that the Church might have something worthwhile to teach me that I didn't already possess, this perspective started to change, and various teachings started to make sense to me in a way they hadn't before. And I can assure you that this is a much happier way of being Catholic than living with constant internal tension.

--

As you may know, our Archbishop Tim Costelloe has been given a leadership role in the current synod gathering taking place in Rome. And shortly before he left Perth, he put out a beautiful reflection on what would be taking place. And I quote from this letter:

“In our local context, which for most of us means our parish community, what the Lord seems to be asking of us is that we dedicate ourselves to the task of helping our people to understand, to embrace and to realise in practice their fundamental call to be, in the words of Pope Francis, “missionary disciples”: people who embody, radiate and share the joy of the gospel with others; disciples who, as sharers in the priesthood of Christ, make of their lives a gift of generous and self-sacrificing love for others; and people who strive to do this in whatever ways are open to them in their individual circumstances.”
(Archbishop Costelloe's Letter on the Synod, 21 September 2024)

Thank you for indulging me with such long homily. Let me emphasise that, in all of this, I will still be “Father” for you and with you. But we are all adults, and we are all fellow disciples of Christ. And the more we each open ourselves to this wonderful invitation from the Lord to live as full-bodied disciples of his, the more that something good, and true, and beautiful will take root in our parish community; and the more we will become that light on the hill for our brothers and sisters in this part of the world, offering an attractive and compelling witness that we need not live lives trapped in fear, or hatred, or vice, but that the hope and freedom and goodness that Christ offers us is a real thing – indeed, the only thing worth giving our lives for.