

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Child's Play

There is an extraordinary encounter in today's Gospel between two strands of Jesus' teaching, both controversial in our time. One is marriage; the other, children.

The Law

The Pharisees who approach Jesus "to test him" used really screwed-up language about marriage; they want to know what is against the Law – *what they can't get away with*. Jesus is more interested in the positive values of marriage; and he declares a value so God-based, so inviolable, that it takes the breath even of his own disciples. The device of their *asking Jesus about his teaching again, "back in the house"*, is Mark's way of inserting the reflection of the later Church back into Gospel times. The "asking" may be twenty years after Jesus' death, but it is still "in the house" – that is, part of the sincere reflection of the Church on the Gospel, in which they recognize the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The meaning is that the Church found Jesus' teaching highly surprising, hard to accept. Well – how contemporary, and relevant, do you want the Gospel to be?

The Facts

Upsettingly, practically half the people who still get married in our society later decide they were mistaken. Even more upsettingly, Catholics are more or less in line with this figure; as if the presence of Jesus' surprising doctrine has made no impression, and we are in this matter indistinguishable from the great mass of society. Of course, most marriages are now "mixed", between a Catholic and a non-Catholic. I have no comparative figures for mixed versus unmixed marriages. But I shouldn't wonder if they were pretty similar. Our culture is soaked through with the impression, or even belief, that marriage is soluble. The routine processing of civil divorce favours this interpretation. Only the experience of marital breakdown – by which time it is too late to turn the clock back – can unveil the hidden truth, that this is the most painful experience, the most intimately wounding blow that can be delivered between people.

No Longer Two

A good marriage teaches the partners that the old habit of *thinking for yourself* is no longer appropriate to the facts. Marriage is thinking, feeling and living for one another, and finding in

this new reality a greater way of being alive, a life whose breath, bread, longing, seeking, finding, building, enjoying, working, and resting are all shared, mutual, inclusive. That's pretty positive. But it goes further. Married people share bills, burdens, pain, failure, illness, poverty, loss – and *inequality* too! When was toothache, or disappointment, ever equally divided? When did old age or disability strike two persons with equal force? And when death do us part, will not one mourn *alone* for years, out of selfless love for the other? There's no place in this relationship for counting the cost.

Like Little Children

How perceptively Mark turns to the message brought by children at this point. *Let them come to me, do not stop them*: his value for children is as surprising as his value for marriage. If marriage has a special depth and destiny *because of the reign of God, who made them one flesh*, so children become the teachers of adults, who must *welcome the reign of God like a little child*. Like people who need to relearn walking on a new hip, or relearn to speak as they recover from a stroke, so must we become little again in order to enter the new humanity which is *no longer two, but one flesh*. Bridal couples seldom think they will be *remade* in their marriage; but that is what it is like. Perhaps, for some, their re-creation awaits the moment when they hold in their hands a little child, who will teach them the way to enter the Kingdom.

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