

Made for Each Other

Sermon for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, 7 October 2018

Genesis 2: 18-24; Psalm 8; Hebrews 1: 1-4, 2: 5-12; Mark 10: 12-26

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, ACT, Australia

Revd Canon Prof Scott Coddell

+In the Name of God: Father, Son & Holy Spirit. AMEN.

When I was Rector of St Paul's, Manuka, on this Sunday closest to St Francis' Day on October 4th, I used to bless people's pets in the Eucharist. It was a lovely occasion. Grandparents brought grandkids and their numerous animals; dogs barked, birds sang in their cages, and our squirming cat was always brought forward by Lisa for his blessing, before being let loose to find his way out of the Church and back to the Rectory. It was a great Eucharistic celebration of our place in God's creation, but also of our hope for the new creation, when a world of human violence, and of animal savagery—which Tennyson called "nature red in tooth and claw"—would eventually be set free from its suffering. And all this thanks to Jesus Christ, who stands at the heart of creation and loves it and suffers for it as God's chief agent in creation, as Hebrews testifies today, and who now as our risen Lord is lifted up as the great hope for creation.

Something else I used to do at Manuka around this time of year were a number of Spring weddings. Because, as Genesis reminds us today, as much as we love the animals and belong with them, God knows that it's our own kind that we most crave to be with, and especially in the wonderful mixture of like and unlike that men and women find together. Genesis regards us as God's agents in caring for and helping each other, and in bringing the human future to birth.

I'm struck that in this Genesis passage, after Yahweh has brought the animals to Adam for him to name, he does the same with the woman: he brings her to Adam. God gives Adam the freedom to make what he will of the partner he's given, and I for one find room enough here to be flexible about the gender of marriage partners. But it's also clear from this passage that the marriage bond is special, and that it's more than something we just make up—more than a contract of mutual convenience. The priest at a wedding does after all say, "Those whom God has joined together let no-one separate." This reminds us that while spouses make the promises and marry each other, it's God who brings them together, as the priest declares. And, again through the priest, it's God who blesses the marriage. So marriage is God business, not just human business. It reflects God's will for the whole creation to be fruitful and to be fulfilled.

In our Gospel today, Jesus sticks up for marriage and family in the face of religious leaders who made it too easy for dissatisfied husbands to abandon their wives and children. They had the weight of legal tradition on their side, but Jesus went back to first principles to remind everyone that marriage was part of God's original blessing in creation, and not just a matter of custom.

Very conservative—well, yes—but also very radical in wanting to protect vulnerable women and children at a time when single parenthood, like widowhood, meant living a dangerously exposed life. Likewise Jesus sticks up for children in today's gospel, and demands that they be taken seriously. They matter to God, and like their mothers can't be dismissed. Jesus cuts across social practice and tradition in the name of a more radical, more original vision of what marriage and family mean in the divine economy.

And so today we stand up for the dignity of marriage and the proper care of children whenever these are threatened. For instance, we'll want to ensure that jobs and housing, that schools and family services, that community bonds and shared expectations all line up to make it easier for people to stick together, and to raise secure, healthy-minded children. And this commitment should extend to families and children in the grip of our border protection system, too, including those immigrants who yearn to be reunited with their

families. Otherwise as a nation we join those on the wrong side of today's Gospel—those happy to split up spouses, and tell children to get lost.

Friends, it doesn't always work out as we'd like it to, this vision of creation. Individual creatures suffer terribly, our beloved pets have to be put down, species become extinct, and our world is warming to such dangerous levels that we face a catastrophic future. Likewise marriages end, while children grow up emotionally fragile and angry. We also see the bond between men and women becoming ever more fraught and contested. The blessing of gender becomes problematic, weaponised by both the right and the left. So it's easy to become sceptical of happy endings. But remember Jesus, according to our Hebrews reading, who stands in the midst of those he calls sisters and brothers, praising his Father, as the countervailing pledge of all things made new. And because it's Jesus, we can trust that this promised future is more than just wishful thinking.

So we needn't pretend that things are more straightforward than they actually are in the natural world, or in the world of relationships. But God has secured the future of creation through Jesus Christ, as we read in Hebrews today, and so God can still call us through Jesus Christ to take up the challenge of creation. Marriage and family is a big part of that, as we're reminded in today's

readings, and Jesus is going to help us with those. But when things don't work out, he's still there, bearing the world's suffering, until at last, with Jesus and the whole creation, we come to share in God's glory. In the meantime we do our best—and we seek the sustaining vision of that new creation in advance, Sunday by Sunday, here in the Eucharist.

The Lord be with you ...