

The Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Deuteronomy 18:15-20
<i>Response</i>	O that today you would hearken to his voice! Harden not your hearts
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 7-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 7:32-35
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	[T]he people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 1:21-28

The fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year B continues our journey through the letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians—his first letter to the Church at Corinth. And it continues our study of chapter 7, which as I’ve mentioned before, is Paul’s...it’s the chapter that deals with Paul’s teaching on marriage and celibacy. And for this Sunday, the Church gives us some of the most striking verses in chapter 7, because they are one of the places in the New Testament where Paul comes out most explicitly in favor of the merits of celibacy.

So as I’m sure you’ve noticed, there are lots of debate within various Christian circles about married state of life, as opposed to the celibate state. And of course in the Roman Catholic tradition, we have a long tradition of reverence in regard for consecrated virginity, as well as the celibacy of ordained ministers—celibate priesthood. And those are controversial positions that the Church takes. And it’s fascinating to me, that if you look at, for example, the history of the Protestant Reformation, that so many Protestant ecclesial communities so quickly abandoned celibacy (the discipline of celibacy)...when Paul, who, certainly for Luther and Calvin, was the great champion. They saw him as the champion of the reformation, as kind of the guiding light of some of the principles of the Protestant Reformation.

Paul himself was one of the strongest advocates for celibacy in the New Testament, so...and it’s these verses that we’re about to read in which he makes a case for

celibacy. So let's look at them together. This is 1 Corinthians chapter 7, verse 32-35, where he's contrasting the married state with the celibate state. And we'll see what he has to say about this.

Alright, in chapter 7, verse 32, immediately after telling the Corinthians in verse 31 that the form of this world was passing away—that the old creation was passing away—Paul launches into his discussion of the difference between the married state and the celibate state. And this is what he says:

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman or girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.¹

Let's stop there. Alright, so a few things here. I'm going to go back to, once again, the two circles of the old creation and the new creation—of “this world” and “the world to come.” Because that is the immediately preceding verse to the reading for this week...is Paul's statement that “this world”, the old creation, is passing away.

And one of the reasons I think that's important is that if you look at the New Testament as a whole, especially the teachings of Jesus, it's very clear that the idea, the rationale behind consecrated virginity, behind abstinence from sexual relations or living a celibate life as Jesus says in Matthew 19:12— “for the sake of the kingdom”—that the rationale behind it is eschatological. It's driven by the teaching of Jesus and the early Christians that marriage (the state of marriage) is something that belongs to “this world,” this passing world, and that virginity or consecrated celibacy is something that anticipates the life of “the world to come.” It anticipates the new creation.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

The classic example of this—I'm not going to go into it in any detail right now, I've covered it elsewhere—is the famous debate between Jesus and the Sadducees about whether there'll be any marriage in the resurrection. This is in Matthew chapter 22. Also, it's in Mark chapter 12. And in both of those chapters, the Sadducees basically give Jesus this hypothetical of a woman who had five husbands who died successively. And they ask:

In the resurrection, therefore, to which of the seven will she be wife? For they all had her.

They're trying to point out the absurdity of the idea of a bodily resurrection by positing a situation in which a woman would have to be married to five men at the same time in the resurrection. And Jesus says:

“You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

And it's very important here to notice that first of all, Jesus is talking about men and women there. Because men marry; women are given in marriage. So he's using both forms of the verb to describe both men and women. So he's saying there'll be neither sex—neither male nor female is going to be in a married state in the resurrection.

But it's fascinating...if you look at Luke chapter 20, which is not the reading for this week. But of course, Luke is a companion of Paul. So there's lots of fascinating parallels between the letters of Paul and the Gospel of Luke. But it's really interesting...if you look in Luke 20, verse 34-36, Jesus Himself uses the language of “this world” and “the world to come” or “this age” and “the age to come” when He's talking about marriage and celibacy—just like Paul. Listen to what He says:

And Jesus said to them, “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the

resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die any more, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.

Wow, isn't that fascinating? So when Jesus is talking about marriage and celibacy, He explicitly couches it in the Gospel of Luke chapter 20, as a distinction between the sons of "this age" and sons of "the age to come"—between the old creation and the new creation, between a state in which people die (this world) and then the state in which there will be no more death (namely, the resurrection of the body).

Alright, so if we bring that idea back into Paul's teaching here about marriage and celibacy in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, we see that the rationale, one of the rationales for celibacy, is that the person who lives the celibate life now is in a sense anticipating the life of the resurrection in this world. The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but the sons of the age to come (the children of the new world) don't marry. But they live the life of the resurrection *now*.

Now Paul takes that, and he kind of draws out of it the practical implications for the difference of the state of marriage and celibate state. And he says:

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife...

Likewise, an unmarried woman or girl—and the Greek word there is virgin. I don't know why they didn't just translate it as virgin in the Revised Standard Version. It's the word *parthenos*. It means "virgin." So he's making a distinction here between an unmarried grown woman—probably like a widow, for example—and then an unmarried young woman, i.e. a virgin. So Paul is saying here:

And the unmarried woman or girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

So what is Paul doing here? He's not laying down a law that all Christians have to be celibate and all Christians have to avoid marriage. That was never the teaching of the Church. However, from the beginning, apostolic Christianity (following Judaism, by the way)—I could go into a long lecture on this, but amongst the Essenes and the Dead Sea Scrolls writers, as well as in the Jews of Egypt...among the Jews of Egypt and Alexandria, there were groups of Jewish men and women who lived celibate lives. So celibacy, kind of monastic lifestyle, was something that was present in Judaism before it was present in Christianity. You can look at that in Josephus' description of the Essenes or Philo's *On the Contemplative Life*, where he describes a group of people called the Therapeutae that lived in actually Mareotis—Lake Mareotis, Egypt. Anyway, I'm sorry. I'm going off too much.

The point is, celibacy—celibate life—is part of Judaism before it's part of Christianity. And so John the Baptist is celibate. Jesus is celibate. Paul is celibate. So one of the most fascinating things to me about contemporary discussion of this is that so many Christians who have a problem with celibacy or think celibacy is weird or celibacy is somehow disordered or strange...tend to forget that Jesus was celibate. Paul is celibate. John the Baptist is certainly celibate. I mean, he's eating bugs for dinner. The guy is a bachelor; I'm sorry.

But there were other Jews who were celibate as well. And the reason is because of the Jewish worldview. There was an anticipation of the new creation, the idea that our bodies weren't created ultimately just for this world but for the world to come, in which there would be no marriage, there would be no more death. So there'd be no more need for procreation.

So Paul plugs into that, and what he's trying to get the Corinthians to do is he's trying to encourage them—both men and women—to embrace the celibate life, because he wants them to be free from anxieties. And he says:

...the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided.

And if you're married and trying to live the Christian life, you'll know Paul is right. It is difficult to live in the married state, because the married state has so many duties and concerns and anxieties and burdens that are very "this worldly." They're very focused on finances, health, education, politics. There are just things...you have to live in the world if you're going to be a responsible father or responsible mother, responsible husband or responsible wife. It's part of the married state to be very much immersed in the things of this world. Even though married people are called to live in the world but not of the world, it's tough to do so...because our interests are divided between the things of the world and the things of Heaven. The same thing with an unmarried woman. He says there:

And the unmarried woman or girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband.

...and about the worldly affairs that come with domestic life, family life, so on and so forth.

So what Paul is trying to do is encourage the Corinthians—who, by the way, these are ex-pagans. There are groups of Vestal Virgins in certain pagan temples and stuff, but there's no widespread practice of voluntary, consecrated virginity or celibacy in the pagan world, like there was in Judaism. It was always a minority in Judaism, don't get me wrong. The majority has always been marriage, the minority consecrated virginity or celibacy.

But it's almost nonexistent in the pagan world, in part because pagans have all kinds of different ideas about sexuality. And they certainly don't have the same kind of sexual morals that you find in Judaism, which would restrict all sexuality activity between a husband and a wife within the married covenant in a way that's open to procreation and to life.

So it's just a whole different universe. So Paul is trying...it's interesting to me how fast Paul is, in a sense, trying to run with the Corinthians. Because in chapter 6, he was telling them not to go to brothels. Now he's telling them to embrace

celibacy...or he's encouraging them, I should say, to see the value of celibacy and consecrated virginity.

So this text really is going to lay the foundation for the practice, the esteem, of consecrated celibacy and virginity and the practice of it in the Christian Church. So it's very important—and fortuitous—that the Church gives us this as the second reading for today. Because the fact is, there are people sitting in the congregation, lots of people—the majority of Catholics are called to the married state. But there are people who are called to consecrated virginity and consecrated celibacy. And people need to realize that that's not some late medieval invention. That's a part of apostolic Christianity.

And it's interesting...you could make the case that when it disappears from Christian groups, that's a real problem, because it's a serious departure from the apostolic form of Christianity, which always esteemed celibacy and virginity, precisely because it's the model that Christ Himself lived. He's the ultimate model for every Christian after Him.

So in closing, I'd like to end with a couple of quotations about this from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on two things: first, just on the value of virginity and its eschatological motivation; and then second, on the rationale for consecrated celibacy, in particular for priests (for ordained priests). So if you look at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1619, it's really interesting that the section on consecrated virginity in the *Catechism* actually occurs in the middle—plopped in the middle—of the section on marriage. You wouldn't think the virginity doctrine would be in the section on the Sacrament of Marriage, but there's a close connection. Listen to what it says here:

Virginity for the sake of the kingdom of heaven is an unfolding of baptismal grace, a powerful sign of the supremacy of the bond with Christ and of the ardent expectation of his return, a sign which also recalls that marriage is a reality of this present age which is passing away.²

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 1619; cf. Mark 12:25; 1 Cor 7:31

And if you go to the footnote, guess what the *Catechism* refers to? Mark chapter 12—Jesus’ teaching on no marriage in the resurrection—and 1 Corinthians chapter 7, verse 31...the reading for today. So the Church couches her teaching about virginity for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven and the eschatology of Jesus and the pastoral teaching of Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 7.

What about celibate priesthood? If you look at paragraph 1579 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we find something similar—another quotation of 1 Corinthians 7. Listen to this:

All the ordained ministers of the Latin Church, with the exception of permanent deacons, are normally chosen from among men of faith who live a celibate life and who intend to remain celibate “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” Called to consecrate themselves with undivided heart to the Lord and to “the affairs of the Lord,” [1 Cor 7:34] they give themselves entirely to God and to men.³

That last line there:

Called to consecrate themselves with undivided heart to the Lord and to “the affairs of the Lord...”

If you look at the footnote there, it’s 1 Corinthians 7. So why does the Church continue to practice this discipline of consecrated celibacy—priestly celibacy in particular? Well, St. Paul is the reason. Because Paul recognized that on a practical level, for a man to give himself entirely in an undivided way to the Lord and to the service of the Church, the ideal situation is that he would be in the celibate state...he would be in an unmarried state, just like John the Baptist the Prophet was celibate, just as Jesus was celibate, just as the apostle Paul was celibate.

So too those who consecrate themselves to Christ through celibacy with an undivided heart as ministers of the Lord can give themselves wholeheartedly to the affairs of the Lord and to God and men. And for that we are truly, truly grateful in

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 1579

the Catholic Church. I say that as a lay person, as a thank you to all you priests out there who've made that gift of yourself so that you could have that undivided devotion to the Lord and also serve with an undivided heart the Bride of Christ, the Church.