

Over recent weeks, as we have listened to the Gospel, we have noticed how difficult it has been for the disciples to fully understand Jesus' message. This was especially the case when he told them that he was destined to suffer, to die and to be raised on the third day. Peter said that this couldn't happen, but Jesus rebuked Peter forcefully, saying "Get behind me, Satan". After this, you can imagine Peter asking how they will ever come to understand Jesus and his teaching. As time has gone on, Jesus has gradually been helping them to understand what he has been saying.

It is all about being receptive to God and God's plan for all of creation. The incident with the children in today's gospel illustrates this well. People are bringing children to Jesus, but the disciples keep turning them away. Jesus insists that they are allowed come to him. And it becomes a teaching moment. These children show how to be receptive to the kingdom of God. Jesus insists that his disciples welcome the kingdom like a little child. A welcome like this would be characterised by innocence, openness, wonder, and joy. As well as this, a child is dependent on others. Here is the model of a disciple; the model of someone receptive to God's action in the world and in their lives. They aren't so independent that they don't need God. This is the attitude that is necessary to cultivate if we wish to be true disciples of Jesus.

If we keep this in mind, then we can begin to understand what Jesus is doing in the dispute with the religious leaders about divorce and marriage. When they ask a question about what is permitted in the Law, Jesus turns it around and challenges them. They are framing everything in terms of law, which means that they are seeing marriage in terms of rights and obligations. In other words, they see marriage in terms of a contract. Their question is about how a husband can get out of the contract. Just as in an earlier scene Jesus had said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan, because the way you think is not God's way", in this scene he accuses the religious leaders of having a hard heart. They don't understand God's plan for creation. They are not receptive to God and the kingdom of God.

This leads Jesus to go right back to the beginning, to the story of creation in the Book of Genesis, which we heard in our first reading. Jesus re-affirms that teaching. It begins by stressing the importance of relationships for human flourishing. "It is not good that the man should be alone". The teaching then points to the close bond that the relationship creates: "this

at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh”. In other words, there is an equality in this partnership. This is further emphasised in the saying that “the two become one flesh”. The relationship is like a model of what God’s plan for the renewal of the whole of creation looks like. There is one final thing in this teaching that is important. It is that God has joined them; God is the creator of the relationship. This is what seemed to be missing in the question that the religious leaders asked Jesus. If they were only seeing marriage in legal terms, then they missed the deep meaning of the bond that God has created in marriage. This bond is a gift of God; it is a grace.

This teaching of Jesus is really about how to be a disciple. Those who had been following Jesus and listening to him had heard a lot of the theory, but in this conversation about marriage, they learn that his message is not simply theory but that it is a practical way of life. For most people, marriage is the way they live as disciples of Jesus. We could almost say that marriage is a school of discipleship. It is in that relationship and in the family that people live out the true meaning of Christian discipleship. The pattern of Jesus’ own life becomes a pattern for the husband and wife. We can relate this to the saying of Jesus today about the children. A husband and wife grow in their trust of each other and in doing this they also grow in their trust of God. In this way they grow in personal freedom, because personal freedom is linked to personal maturity.

The central trajectory of Jesus’ life as we have heard several times is his journey through death to new life. This is the journey of each baptised person. Once again, we can see this same trajectory in marriage. The Genesis story is also a story of sin and failure, Jesus completes this with teaching about reconciliation and new life. This too is the experience of marriage, so that husband and wife face difficult times with hope and trust in God. God gives the grace to live this gift. This too is discipleship.

The religious leaders who challenged Jesus had a limited view of marriage as a legal contract. They focused on what was the minimum you needed to do to fulfil the contract. Jesus, on the other hand, invites people into relationships that will see them be the best people they can be. This is the path of discipleship.