

Church of St Edward the Confessor, Lugano

A Sermon preached by Bishop Michael Langrish on 3 October 2021 - Trinity 18



'In need of one another'

The opening words of our first reading from Genesis: *"The Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner'".* Then in the Gospel, those words of Jesus : *"and the two shall become one flesh."* So they are no longer two, but one flesh. *Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'*

So, it obvious what today's sermon has to be about then isn't it? Marriage.

But not necessarily. These two readings have a much wider application than that. They in fact have something very important to say about all human relationships, and especially those within the church, taken as a whole. The two things are linked. Historically one of the phrases that the church has used to describe Christian marriage is as (in Latin) an *ecclesiola in ecclesia* – literally *a little church within the church*. Each Christian marriage is intended to be a church in miniature, that's what the church blesses in Holy Matrimony. Which means that, in considering the qualities of a good marriage, we could start with the characteristics of what

the church is called to be, and then read off from them the qualities, virtues and values we should expect to find in a marriage. But equally we might work the other way and say: if this is what the scriptures teach us about the miniature church that is marriage, then surely, in the same way, we should be expecting to find the same things on a larger scale in that bigger version of ecclesia – a local church or chaplaincy, in the life of a Diocese, or the church as a whole. So, with this morning's readings in mind, let's take those words '*it's not good for a human being to be alone*' and work from the smaller to the larger, from marriage to the church. And if we do that, then I suggest that there are some very important lessons for us all to learn about why is it not good for any human to be alone?

First life is, even before marriage, (but as the marriage service puts it): *a gift of God in creation*. Human beings are made by God, for God, and to reflect the life of God in the world. The very first thing that the bible tells us about our nature is that we are made in the image of God. And here I want to emphasise that word **we**.

It is not good for us to be alone because Adam alone doesn't fully reflect the image of God "*God created **humankind** in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created **them***". ([Genesis 1:27](#)). The good news, gentlemen, is that it does all depend on us, the male of the species needs the female to even begin to be able to reflect the nature and qualities of God to the world. And the bad news, ladies, is that you need us men too. Just as we need others who are different from us in race and ethnicity, in temperament and outlook. One theologian puts it like this: "*Not man alone, nor the man and woman together, but only the whole of humanity is the fully developed image of God, his children, his offspring. The image of God is much too rich for it to be fully realized in a single human being, however richly gifted that human being might be. It can only be somewhat unfolded in its depth and riches in a humanity counting billions of members*" (Herman Bavinck). Or to use the rather more pithy words of Cardinal Basil Hume: "*Because we are made in the image of God, then every man woman and child knows something of God that no one else knows.*" We are unique, but not alone. We need one another. No sexism, no racism, no caste or classism – no individualism - in the church of God, for each of these things in some way distorts or diminishes the image of God that is seen in the world.

It is not good that the man should be alone, for other reasons as well. Most obviously with one man on his own there is no reproduction, no growth. If there had only been Adam, then the population of the world would have remained at one. Alone Adam could not be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1.28)). Put very simply, it takes a biological man and a biological woman to procreate. I know that all kinds of other possibilities seem to exist now, but all rely on this principle of complementary and addition. Without X + Y, Z (or XY) cannot exist. And this same

principle of growth and reproduction based on difference and complementarity is written into all other aspects of life too. *'There are different kinds of gifts,'* St Paul tells us *'There are different kinds of service there are different kinds of working . . . each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.'* No one single person can possibly have a monopoly of all the knowledge, all the skills, all the experience, all the gifts of character necessary for a healthy and growing community. Just the thought of it is ridiculous. But you do come across some people who think it is not so; that it all depends on them. And even more do we find groups who think that they have already got all that is needed for the good of their life, so – everyone else keep out, thank you very much. If you won't keep out, then sit down and keep quiet. There are societies like this, and communities and churches too. Far too often I have come across churches which are not growing, or even worse declining, because the gifts of some are not recognised, used and encouraged, or when the skills and experience of some are rated more important than the insights and contributions of others, especially those who might be new, or newer. Ask yourself for the moment which member of your own body is the oldest – the nose? the ear? the big toe? Again, it is a ridiculous question. We know that it doesn't work like that. And even when we have had bits of the body replaced – a new hip, a new lens in the eye, a liver transplant, or whatever – we desperately need the whole lot to be working in harmony together, and we rightly fear what might happen when they don't. So why don't we feel the same way about the body of Christ. I have seen far too many examples of what I might call 'the church of the revolving door' where new people are drawn in, stay for a while, and then leave because they feel unnoticed, unvalued, their gifts and experience not fully appreciated or made use of in the life of the body as a whole.

And it is not just communal growth that is affected when we opt for individualism, or restrict our interactions to people just like ourselves, It is not good that should be alone because when we are, that restricts our personal growth and development too. God made Eve to **complement** Adam. That's not *compliment* like "Oh Adam, aren't you so strong!" It's *complement* with an 'e,' which has the idea of completing. And this is about more than procreation, it is also about partnership: *"the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner."* And as we all know, partnerships – in business or in the home work best when we do, complement one another, her strengths compensate for my weaknesses; his ability makes up for my failings. And as we learn from one another so do we personally grow. I hope that my time here in Lugano might have some small benefit for you. I am absolutely certain that it will be of value to me, and that I will go home having gained something, grown in some way, from what I have seen and learned and experienced, the people I have met, here. A healthy church is one that enables us to come alongside others who are different; and

to benefit from this. But for that to happen we all have to work at creating an atmosphere of safety, openness and trust. We are persons, and not just individuals. Personhood requires relationships. Humans are social beings. That's why in prison "solitary confinement" is a punishment. It's hard to be alone. And that's why also churches have a special responsibility to be aware of, and care for, those in their congregations, and in their wider community, who find themselves alone – the elderly, the widow, the bullied child, the anxious adolescent, the abandoned spouse, the frightened asylum seeker or the disorientated refugee. It really is not good to be made to be alone.

This should not surprise us when we, as Christians, know God as Trinity, three persons in one. Father, Son and Holy Spirit have never been alone! God is eternally relational. And he is love. And it is out of that love that he creates us, you and me and every other person ever to have been found on this globe, and for the fundamental reason that he loves each one of them and wants each one to respond with love for him too. Love and relationship are all – it is not good to be alone. And it is for this reason too that throughout the bible whenever the Lord calls out to a person, it is always with a *people* in mind: *a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people (1 Peter 2.9)* There is no such thing as an individual Christian; rather we were baptised into one body and each are members of it, and it is as a body that we are called to reflect God in the world, as a body to grow together in numbers and faith, as a body to encourage one another in life's journey and help each other grow in Christ. And as a body to worship God as well.

From the very beginning, God is about a *people*. Individuals can love God, but the beauty of God's design is that He is wants a *people* for Himself, to live out together a life of love. As individuals we are instructed to *pray*, but it is as a *people*, his own people united in love for him and for another, that we are called to **worship** – to give God His true worth, for that is what the word means. Modern western Christianity is so often so very "me" centred. But at its core, the gospel is not merely about "me" but "us." Christ came to redeem a *people (Titus 2.14)*. To love God involves loving others. When asked by the disciples for instruction on prayer Jesus told them to start by saying **Our** Father – not mine alone, or the father of just a few: The Father, as Paul puts it, *from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name*. And so our central act of worship – Jesus instruction to '*do this in remembrance of me*'; we call Communion – that is togetherness, something that we do in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit – which is why on that first Pentecost the faithful were *altogether, in one place*. It ought to be so straightforward but what a hard lesson it seems for we poor sinners to learn: Individualism, sectarianism, doing our own thing. This really is to what the Lord desires. It really is *not good to be alone*.

Genesis 2.18-24

¹⁸Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' ¹⁹So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²²And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.'
²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Mark 10.2-16

²Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' ³He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' ⁴They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' ⁵But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. ⁶But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." ⁷"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

¹⁰ Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. ¹¹He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹²and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

¹³ People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.