

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time - 1 Corinthians 7:32-35

In the homily today I'm going to step out on thin ice. So, I ask you to be patient and forgiving. Because whenever a celibate person decides to speak on marriage, things can become embarrassing.

It is like the two elderly Irish women who were leaving church one Sunday morning. The archbishop of that area had just come to their parish and had preached a lengthy sermon on marriage. As the two women were leaving church, the one said to the other, "Maggie, sure it was a fine homily that his Reverend placed before us this morning on the holy sacrament of marriage! Was it not?" "Indeed it was," said Maggie, "His words were so beautiful, so perfect, so eloquent. I only wish one thing. I wish that I could know as little about the subject as he did."

So why would this celibate take up this perilous topic? Because of today's second reading. In that reading, Paul gives the Corinthians some advice. He compares the celibate and the married life.

Because these words of Paul are so easily and so often misunderstood, they require some comment. We must remember that Paul, as in all of his letters, is addressing a **specific** congregation at a **specific** period of time.

Paul is trying to give the Corinthians advice on whether they should enter marriage or not. His advice is intended to be very practical. In fact, his central concern is expressed in his introduction to the topic: "I would like all of you to be free of anxiety."

Now Paul knows that both married people and unmarried people are anxious, and he describes their anxiety. He says that the unmarried person is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, whether he or she is doing all that is necessary to build the Kingdom of God.

The married person is also anxious about the affairs of the Lord, for he or she is also called to build God's Kingdom. But the married person is also anxious about pleasing his or her spouse.

According to Paul marriage involves **more** anxiety. That is why Paul says that married persons are divided. They must give some of their anxiety to building the Kingdom and some of their anxiety to pleasing their spouse.

Paul eventually recommends that the Corinthians do not enter into marriage. It is only a recommendation, and it is not given because Paul thinks that there is anything wrong with marriage.

Paul recommends celibacy because he believes it's easier, it involves less anxiety. Paul, like all early followers of Christ, believed that Jesus would return in glory within the next few months, that the world would soon come to an end and a new creation would be established.

Therefore, his advice to the Corinthians at that particular time in history was: Keep it simple. Keep it easy. Don't complicate your life with more responsibilities because the world is coming to an end.

Now subsequent generations of Christians took Paul's words and read them in new contexts. They concluded that celibacy was a higher way of living, than marriage.

If you look at today's passage, however, Paul doesn't say any of that. He prefers celibacy because he thinks it's easier, simpler, in light of the fact that the world is passing away.

You and I do not live in a world where we expect the immediate return of Christ. So what value, if any, are these particular words of Paul to the Corinthian community for us?

To answer that question let us look at another verse of today's second reading: Let each of you live the life that has been assigned to you, the life to which God has **called** you.

What Paul clearly believes and what the church today teaches is that every person has a **calling** from God. The Latin word for calling is "vocation". Every person has a vocation to build God's Kingdom.

Some do that through the married life, some do that by remaining single. Most of us here in church today know to which vocation God is calling us to. Others among us are still discerning what that call is. This is fine and good. But all of us should know that each of us has a vocation to serve the Lord, either as a married person or as a single person.

So instead of opposing these two states of life to each other, or trying to figure out which is better, it is much more helpful to recognize that each of these two states of life reveals an essential quality of every full human life.

Marriage and celibacy **compliment** each other because every person needs a combination of intimacy and freedom in their lives.

Therefore, we should all follow the advice of St. Paul: "Live the life to which God has called you."

If you are called to married life, then live your marriage vocation clearly, giving witness to the intimacy in your life. But at the same time be open to the witness of freedom that comes from celibacy.

If you are unmarried, then use your freedom to serve God's people. But do not ignore the witness of married life which reminds you that life is not to be lived in isolation, that a complete life requires deep relationships with others.

If we can live the life to which we have been called, and learn from the example of those who live another vocation, then we can **together** become the people, and the church that God calls us to be. AMEN.