

## Second Sunday in Lent (20/02/05)

*For this is the will of God, even your sanctification: that ye should abstain from fornication.* (the Epistle).

Today's epistle (which comes from what many think is the oldest book in the New Testament) is in no doubt: fornication is a very serious sin and (on the most likely interpretation) adultery, which goes beyond fornication by also breaking those rights to fidelity which are inherent in marriage, is even worse. And this is not of course a private quirk of St. Paul; when the Lord condemns committing "adultery in the heart" (Mat. 5.28), he is not trivialising the bodily sin but warning us all of its spiritual ramifications.

All this makes sense because of the very high doctrine of marriage adopted in the Old Testament and reinforced by the Lord: "the two shall become one flesh". Marriage is not a trivial arrangement to be got out of at whim, but a bonding only slightly less total than the bond between the Christian and the Lord which is made in baptism. (Of course, no Christian *has* to marry, and this high doctrine is not to be confined to Christian marriage.)

That is one of the reasons why, in the early Church, adultery was held to be so serious a sin that the Church could not presume to forgive it and readmit the sinner to communion. (Apostasy was similarly treated, which shows how close the analogy between baptism and marriage was.) This did not deny that God *might* forgive the sin; the sinner would simply have to spend the rest of life without the Sacraments, praying for God's mercy. However, we now believe there are no sins which the Church *cannot* forgive, *provided* that the sin is acknowledged and that there is true repentance.

Now the epistle was not written as a comment on a particular person, and neither is this sermon. The first duty of a Christian, in almost all cases which involve another person and possible - or even certain - sin, is not to judge that another person, nor to gossip about him or her, but to repent of one's own sins.

A priest might indeed be consulted by a sinner, and then would indeed be judging that person (and nobody else, not even a partner in sin), but secretly. If there is serious sin *and serious repentance*, then the priest will, still secretly, "declare and pronounce" God's forgiveness of the sin and so the restoration of the sinner to the communion of the Church.

The charitable assumption which a Christian is required to adopt towards another Christian, *even if sin is known to have been committed*, is that repentance and forgiveness have followed - unless, which will rarely be the case, we are *certain* that this is not true. And even then, we must always beware of judging more harshly than God!

For those of us who are married, our marriage is a very important part of our Christian duties (and for many, a difficult one if our spouse does not wholly share our faith). I doubt God wants us to be always fussing about this, but we should be striving to "make a go of" the marriage in the spirit of our Lord's teaching. We are not promised a happy marriage; we are told that, as a matter of fact, we are "one flesh" and must live that out.

Married or not, we pray for each other and for all those, Christian or not, who strive for fidelity in marriage and abstinence outside it.

*If you want to know more about divorce, here is a short note. The Lord makes it very clear, following the Old Testament, that God hates divorce. (Malachi 2.16) This is very much a part of the high doctrine of marriage. Sadly, we all know that some marriages become so distorted by evil that only separation seems possible. The Eastern church allows divorce and remarriage in this case. The Western church does not, but is willing to examine the question whether the marriage was valid in the first place (rather legalistically in Rome, more pastorally in those parts of Anglicanism which still take marriage seriously). It is sadly true that too many modern marriages lack the total commitment which the Lord takes for granted. In England, the state's law of divorce in the nineteenth century started as a genuine, if clumsy, attempt to reflect the Lord's teaching as found in Mat. 19.3-12 (though not in other forms of that teaching); but has now in practice, and perhaps soon also in theory, turned into divorce at whim. We pray for many victims of this bad law.*