

27th Sunday (B)

- The film *Shadowlands* portrays the relationship between C.S. Lewis & the American poet, Joy Davidman.
- Their close friendship began just after she had been diagnosed as having cancer & they were both aware of some of the risks involved in embarking on an intimate relationship in these circumstances.
- As it turned out they had three very happy years of married life together.
- Before her death Lewis wrote: *'Love anything, & your heart will certainly be wrung & possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. You must lock it up safe in the coffin of your selfishness. If you do that, your heart will change. It will not be broken. It will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable'*
- Reflecting on what it means to be human, today's First Reading pictures God as a potter forming us out of the dust of the earth.
- We really are part of this beautiful but fragile earth.
- We are born, we grow, we decline & we die.
- There is much about us that is fragile & breaks.
- There is much about us that struggles to endure, that eventually we must face the letting go of things as we age, & our final dissolution in death.
- We belong to the earth & return to it, but, there's so much more to us than this - we have a divine fire within us; we reach for the stars; we dream of the infinite; we have God's very breath in our lungs & God's love in our hearts - And so we're given a picture of God giving us the kiss of life, breathing his love into us, giving us this wonderful experience that we call life.
- It is here that today's reading takes up the story - We human beings are made in God's image: AND we are not meant to be alone.
- The author of the Genesis story paints a picture of our incompleteness: Adam is left with his rib (really meaning: his heart) torn from his body - Eve is torn from his heart. Both experience a profound longing to come together, for only together can they be whole.
- The first words spoken by the human race in the Genesis story are the words of joy expressed in today's reading, when man & woman recognise in each other the fulfilment of their longing.
- But this is not the only way to fulfil this need for the other.
- We are also aware of many ways in which people can forgo an exclusive sexual love in committing their lives to aged parents, to careers that involve much loving & much collaborative work to improve the human condition; to intimate relationships that don't involve marriage.
- We also recognise the gift of celibate love in which women & men consecrate their lives to God & offer themselves to the human community in special ways of devoted service.

- People can come to maturity & find fulfilment in all these ways, because essentially, they are all ways of living in love - We are not meant to be alone.
- But, to love also opens us to pain & suffering as C.S. Lewis points out.
- To love is to open ourselves to suffering. There is no other way.
- There's much suffering involved in loving someone – There's much suffering in the love lived by a single person & as well as in consecrated celibate love.
- None of us grows to maturity by running away from all the realities of living our lives, & this includes the pain.
- It is not good for us to be alone & yet, inevitably, death comes to us all & separates us from those we love.
- This is especially painful when death is accidental & premature.
- Today's Gospel deals with something that can be even more painful than death: when one has given one's heart to another in love & in trust & the other person does not honour the commitment & breaks the trust.
- As well as the dangers of tragedy or death, we have to face the possibility & the pain of relationships failing or turning sour.
- Love is beautiful, but it is also delicate, & fragile.
- The rending of a love relationship can leave us shattered in such a way that healing seems impossible.
- Jesus is asked his opinion on the topic of divorce.
- He speaks about the purpose of marriage as he criticises the religious authorities for the ease with which men were able to divorce their wives.
- He challenges them to look beyond the limits of customary law & focus on God's design for marriage as a way of life in which men & women can grow, through unselfish commitment, to become mature co-creators with God in which together they can nurture children in love.
- This is not to say that every marriage is made in heaven; sometimes we human beings, even with the best will in the world, enter into destructive relationships that cannot bring either person to this mature loving.
- Every Catholic parish today has parishioners who are divorced & remarried; some come to Mass.
- In the face of the negative messages you may hear, I want you to know how much you are to be admired for your often heroic faith & the efforts you make to practice your Catholic faith, how much God loves you & how grateful we should be that you hang in here with us, because many have been so hurt by the Church that they have left our company.
- The problem for the Church is that, on the one hand, we want to keep affirming the permanence of married love, & yet, on the other hand, we have an increasing number of Catholics who are divorcing for a whole host of reasons in contemporary life.
- We're caught between the fine ideal Jesus teaches & the frail human condition we all carry in different ways. We haven't got the balance right yet.
- The Church's remedy to marriage breakdown is an annulment.

- An annulment isn't a Catholic divorce.
- A civil divorce says the parties that were married are not now.
- An annulment says that there were factors, often unknown to the couple on the day, which meant that there was never a full & true Christian marriage in the first place. The sacrament is therefore null & void.
- Some Catholics, & certainly people who are not Catholic, cannot face up to the long, complex & legal process involved in an annulment.
- It can be a traumatic experience.
- Others argue that the Church might step away from the more recent legal approach to dealing with marriage &, like the Orthodox Churches, use the Sacrament of Penance to nullify the Sacrament of Marriage & permit in the church another marriage.
- Whatever of the process, Christian teaching on the issue of marriage, divorce & remarriage must always be metered with compassion as well as support for the ideal of marriage as a permanent, life-giving commitment.
- Because we are taking a step into the unknown, they require a profound act of trust – trust in ourselves, trust in each other &, most importantly, trust in God.
- Wherever we find ourselves in our relationships, let us remember the good news that God is love, and that all God's grace is now being offered to us to enable us to love.
- Everyone joining in this Mass, whatever your past history, is capable now of loving and receiving love.
- Knowing that we are not meant to be alone, let us take whatever small opportunities for loving that present themselves to us and we may be surprised at the results.