

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES
TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – YEAR B

First Reading Genesis 2: 18–24

The Bible begins with the Pentateuch (Greek for five books), of which Genesis is the first. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are set in the time before recorded human history, whereas the remaining chapters, 12–50, are set in historical times familiar with ancient records.

These opening chapters of the Bible deal with the beginnings of humanity long before Israel's time. They are regarded as a series of traditional stories, many of which take the form of myths describing the pattern of human behaviour. They are often referred to as 'primeval history'.

Today we are reading the second account of God's creation. The first one was told in the first chapter of the book. They are two different but complementary stories.

In seeking to alleviate the first person's loneliness, God creates animals which the man is invited to name. In doing so, it could be said that he becomes co-creator with God, since naming a person or animal is a way of defining and shaping them.

The notion of a helpmate in the Old Testament does not imply subordination, but on the contrary someone equal or even superior to the one they help. God is often called a 'helper' to humans (Psalm 10: 14).

The man's response to discovering his helpmate is the first lyrical poetry in the Bible. Many more examples will follow, particularly in the Song of Songs.

Praying this passage before today's Gospel on divorce will help to remind us of God's original intention in creating man and woman: that there should be a deep bond between the two people, so they are not alone.

Gospel Mark 10:2–16

Is it against the law for a man to divorce his wife?

Jesus, having left Galilee, was making his way South to Jerusalem. As he arrived in Judea he was met by crowds of people and he began to teach them. Some of the Pharisees there took this opportunity to question Jesus on the emotive subject of divorce.

The Jewish law of divorce

This goes back to Deuteronomy 24: 1. At that time the law was very simple stating how easily a man could divorce his wife and that she would be free to marry again. The divorce bill became more complicated over time, but the process was still very easy and always at the discretion of the man. The problem was the interpretation of the reason a man could divorce his wife. The only condition stated was that he should find 'something objectionable' about her.

Different interpretations

There were two schools of thought: the school of Shammai stated that a man could only divorce his wife if she were guilty of adultery; while the school of Hillel interpreted 'something objectionable' much more widely, and even the smallest fault in the husband's eyes could constitute grounds for divorce. The Hillel school of thought prevailed. Consequently, in Jesus's time women were reluctant to marry, and when Jesus spoke on the subject, he was restoring stability to marriage.

What did Moses command you?

It is to be noted that Jesus quoted Mosaic Law, but added that this law was written because the people at that time 'were so unteachable'. And as the law was laid down in a particular situation it was not permanently binding. Jesus gave authority to his opinion that marriage should be permanent by going further than Deuteronomy and quoting from the Creation story in Genesis 1: 27 and 2: 24 (see First Reading).

Jesus had previously spoken about marriage and re-marriage when he taught on the fulfilment of the Law, (Matthew 5: 31–2) and so the people knew what his answer would certainly be. Herod had divorced his wife and re-married, and the Pharisees may have wished to provoke Herod's hostility towards Jesus.

Let the little children come to me.

Jewish mothers liked to bring their children to be blessed by a distinguished Rabbi, especially on the child's first birthday.

