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WHAT THEREFORE GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER, LET NO MAN SEPERATE – Biblical commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Mark 10, 2-12

And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.” And Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”
And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

Chapter 10 of Mark’s gospel opens with Jesus teaching, the crowds rush to him, but here comes someone who is not happy with his teaching. The evangelist writes “*Pharisees came..*” the Pharisees are those pious laymen who observe all the precepts of the law and for this they detach themselves. The word “Pharisee” as we know means “separate” “*..came up and in order to test him.*” Literally to tempt him. The evangelist uses for these pious, zealous and devote persons the same verb as for the devil, instruments of Satan, why? While Jesus speaks of God as generous love, which puts himself at the service the people, for them God is power because they can use and exercise power.

So they ask him “*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?*” But it is clear that the answer is yes, they do not go there to learn, but just to tempt Jesus. The dissolution of marriage at that time presented no difficulty: a woman is an affliction to her husband? Repudiate her and it will be the end. It is written like this in the Talmud, the sacred book of the Jews and this law of repudiation, is exclusively based on the law of man. Also in the Talmud we read "The woman can be rejected, whether she likes it or not", but she cannot of course repudiate her husband. So they know that the husband can divorce his wife, but they still ask Jesus. “*He answered them, “What did Moses command you?”*” But Jesus should have said what Moses ordered us because the law was for him too. But Jesus distances himself from Moses, from the legislator, because for Jesus God does not legislate, God is the one who creates, expresses himself in creation and not in law and therefore he distances himself.

“They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.” In fact in the book of Deuteronomy chapter 24 v.1, it says *“When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house,..”* The problem was to know what this something indecent was and in Jesus’ time the two schools were divided: the, most rigorous Rabbi Shammaj for whom this something shameful was adultery, and Rabbi Hillel the more open minded and naturally the most followed, believed that a man could divorce his wife for any reason, also because he did not like her anymore or because she had burnt a dish of food.

The Pharisees with this question actually want to approach Jesus from his line of thought, Jesus speaks of the equality of men with God, making him admit that there is an area, which is that of marriage, in which the relationship is not among equals because there is the male who continues to have power over the woman. So Jesus to the Pharisees reply says *“Because of your hardness of heart..”* the heart for the Jewish world meant the mind, the head *“.. he wrote you this commandment.”* For Jesus the written law does not always reflect the will of God nor does it therefore have lasting and permanent value. For Jesus, not everything that is written in the law and to which divine authority is attributed is reality . In part it was a failure to the selfishness or the perverse inclinations of mankind.

And Jesus does not refer to Moses, the lawmaker, but returns to the creator, and he continues *“But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife,..”* in Jesus’ time it was not like this, there was no free choice, the free consent of the couple it was the parents who agreed and established marriages. But Jesus refers to the creation *“...and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh.”* The man and woman find in each other fulfilment, that which was missing to be fully themselves. And Jesus declares *“What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”* When there are two they can be divided, but when they are one they cannot be divided, otherwise they become mutilated.

What Jesus said is so unheard of for the mentality of the age, it is so unacceptable not only for the Pharisees, but also for the disciples themselves, *“And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter.”* because what Jesus is saying is not possible, And Jesus confirms *“.. he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery..”* because he is already married *“..against her.”* in the Palestinian world it was unconceivable that a woman could divorce her husband, but Jesus extends the discussion and therefore it has a universal aspect, , *“...and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”* Jesus does not tolerate the unilateral action of an individual against the other. Jesus always puts himself on the side of the weaker person, the victim of the situation.

